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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MAY, 1974
VOL. 34, No. 6

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

A PERFECT WOMAN TO MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

She lost her diamonds, her beauty and her life. Mike Shayne found her hanging from the shower stall in a sleazy motel, the girl who had tried to take everything life had to offer, and who had paid with her life for one small error.

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A PERFECT WOMAN TO MURDER

By BRETT HALLIDAY

Shayne hadn't wanted the case in the first place, and when he found himself in the middle of murder he knew that something was wrong, from the husband who was the certain suspect to the victim herself . . .

HE SAT on the edge of the rumpled bed, breathing fast. He had dressed quickly and he felt in disarray. But there was no time to worry about grooming. He had planned for weeks, and now it was time for the final act.

He reached down and swept up the black panty hose from the threadbare carpeting. Swiftly, he knotted the feet and whirled the hose to form a twist rope. He snapped his arms wide, testing its strength. Then he sucked in a deep breath and stood.

His heart pumped hard as he stared at the closed door of the

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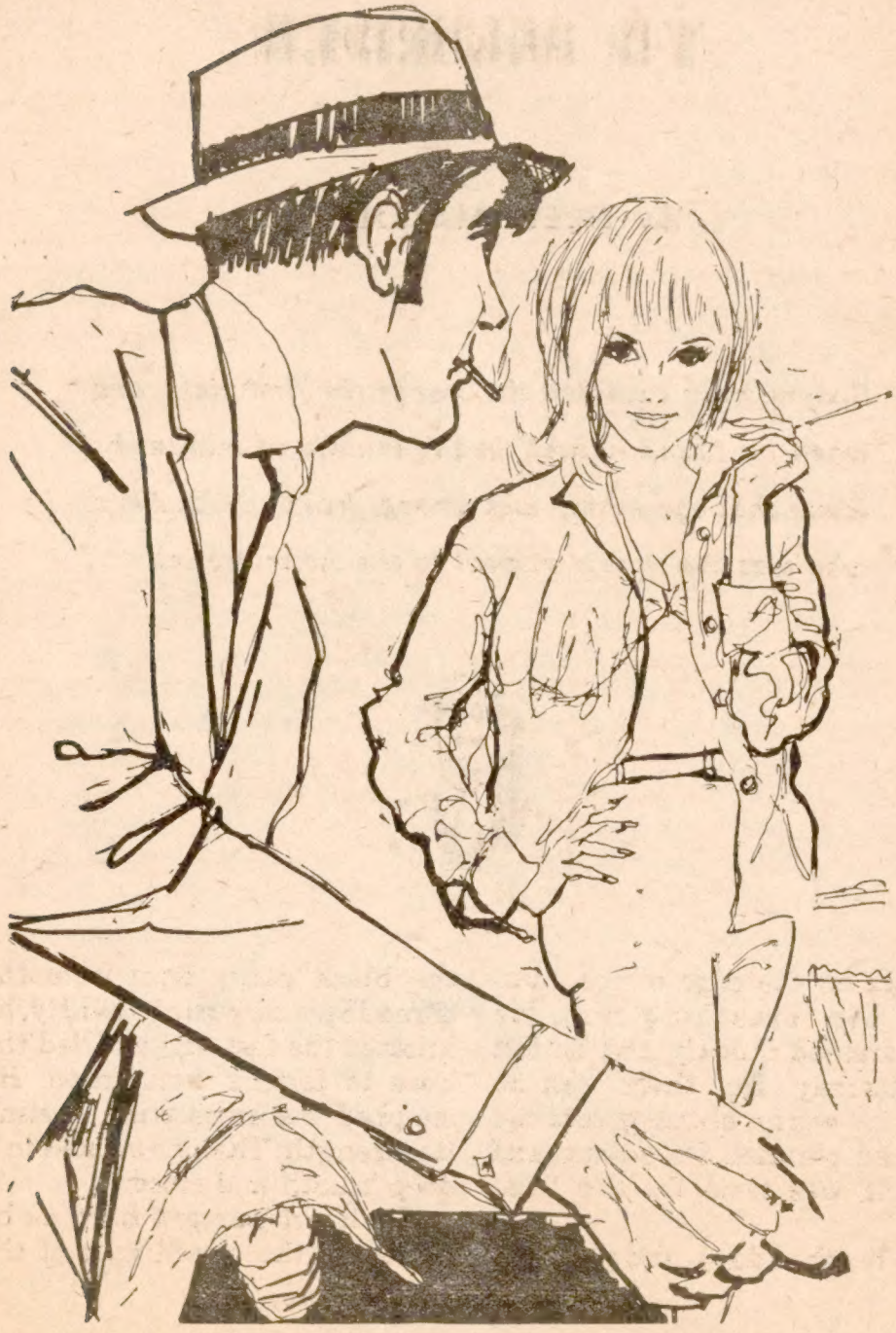
The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel



tiny bath. The sound of shower water from behind the door filled his ears. He guessed she had turned the knobs that controlled the water flow to wide open. It was like her in all things: never moderation.

He opened the bath door. Steam engulfed him. He stepped forward into the cubicle and swept the cheap shower curtain aside. She turned in mild surprise. He whipped the panty hose rope over her head, crossed it and yanked.

It was a long time before he was sure she was dead.

He rocked on his knees back out of the spray of shower water. He was breathing in gasps and for a few seconds he thought his heart might jump out of his chest.

Strength and direction came back in seeps. He stood up, bobbed slightly, then steadied himself, and stared down on the dead woman. He had never killed until now and the sight of the lifeless form curled on the floor in the tiny stall held him in awe.

Water cascaded from her smooth body and was building higher on the floor. Her hip blocked the drain and the water was only about a half inch from the top of the preventive curb. He reached into the shower and shut off the water.

The abrupt quietness frightened him. He wasn't sure why. But he went into a crouch and whirled, stared into the shabby main room. There was only the sagging bed, her discarded clothing, and the single lamp with its bulb which was giving off a weak light.

He finally pulled himself together and looked at the dead woman again, and a sense of satisfaction gradually crept over him. He straightened, stood solid, let out a grunt. She was gone, out of his life. It was what he had needed. He felt as if he had freed himself from a terrible mire.

Then he sneered and reentered the bath. She looked too peaceful curled up there on the tile floor with the water slowly lowering around her body as it seeped under her bare hip and down the drain. Too peaceful and somehow still attractive even with the ends of the rope panty hose floating out from her neck. Her bronze-colored hair drifted in the water.

He grabbed the hose and yanked her into a sitting position. She was much heavier than he had anticipated and, for a second, he thought about leaving her propped against the wall. But his contempt for her would not be satisfied. She was to be displayed for what she was, a parasitic tramp.

Summoning strength from an unknown source, he hoisted her and used his shoulder to brace

her against the wall in a semi-standing position while he looped the hose over the shower pipe and wrapped it several times. He knotted it again and stepped back.

She hung grotesquely. She was slumped, feet spread and sticking out in front of her, arms hanging loosely. Her head lolled, hiding her face. He grabbed her hair and lifted. Her eyes were closed down tight, but her face muscles had been caught in a grimace and a bleeding tongue protruded from between white teeth.

He dropped her head and walked out of the motel unit. He ignored the car and walked swiftly through the silent darkness toward the street, glancing occasionally to the right and left. No sound reached him, no one seemed to be stirring outside the shelters.

He tucked his chin into his neck anyway—as a precautionary measure, almost instinctive—and moved along on quick steps past the motel office to the sidewalk. He turned down the walk.

A half block away from the motel, he broke into a jog. He would jog until he saw a car. Then he would walk. It was a long way to a main thoroughfare where he could find a cab. But that was good. It would allow time for his clothing to dry.

II.

MIKE SHAYNE was propped in his bed, sipping a cognac and ice water while idly leafing through the latest issue of *Harper's*. He only wore pajama bottoms. His large body was slouched, with his muscles relaxed. It was ten minutes after one o'clock on a Wednesday morning now. He had showered, and drowsiness soon would be on him, for he was at peace with life.

It was a rare moment for the Miami private detective. No threats on his well-being, no mayhem in the offing, nothing to glue his mind. He had just finished an extraordinarily enjoyable and uncomplicated evening with his secretary, Lucy Hamilton, in her apartment and he was totally at ease.

The door buzzer sounded.

The readhead scowled, put aside the magazine. But he did not stir from the satin sheets. The buzzer sounded again. Whoever wanted him was impatient. He swung his long legs and sat up, then glanced at the radio alarm clock. The scowl deepened. It was a helluva hour to be leaning on a door buzzer.

Shayne went to the dresser, opened the bottom drawer, took out the .45 rig. He removed the gun, weighed it in his huge fist as the buzzer repeated its summons. He padded into the dark living

room, snapped on lamplight that reached far into the modern vastness.

There was a table to the right of the door, books standing upright on its top. He put the gun behind the books, out of sight of his visitor but close enough to be swept up He opened the door, his arm ready to sweep.

The man who stood on his threshold was a Humpty Dumpty The man was short and shaped like an egg. He wore a pale orange knit shirt and baggy trousers. He shuffled in dirty tennis shoes. There was a new fishing cap, pure white with a vivid green bill shoved back on his head.

"Mr. Shayne?"

"Yeah?"

The man flinched slightly. He looked as if he was a chronic worrier. He had permanent furrows across a high brow. Thin brown hair receded from the brow, disappearing under the cap. He looked fifty or so and nervous, but Shayne saw determination in his blueberry eyes too.

"My name is Andrew Roberts," said the man in a voice that carried a squeak.

The name meant nothing to the detective.

"I want to hire you—"

"Do you know what time it is, pal?" Shayne broke in.

"—to protect me," continued Roberts, ignoring the question. "I. . .Well, I have to meet a man."

"At this hour?"

"Yes."

Shayne was wary. Andrew Roberts looked dressed for fishing, working on a boat in a backyard, maybe, loping along a beach.

But he definitely did not look attired for a meeting.

Andrew Roberts jammed a hand into a pocket of the baggy trousers and yanked out a wad of bills. He shoved the wad at the detective.

"It's five hundred," he said, the squeak in his voice going an octave higher. "Fives, tens and twenties. I had to dig around the house for it. But I'll get more in the morning, as soon as the bank is open. You name your fee, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne didn't move.

"Look," said Roberts, "all I want you to do is go with me. It will take about two hours of your time, less probably. I have to meet this man now. I don't think he will physically attack me, but he could. I am not one who is skilled in violence. I don't know how to protect myself."

Curiosity bested Shayne, and so he asked, "What's this meeting about?"

Roberts shuffled and suddenly the blueberry eyes danced. "It's a. . .business deal. Er. . .printing business."

"You've got printing business

to transact at one-thirty in the morning?"

"Mr. Shayne," Roberts said desperately, "name your fee!"

"Two thousand dollars."

The egg-shaped man didn't even blink. "All right. There'll be another fifteen hundred, cash, with daylight."

Shayne stepped out of the entry, opened his door wide. "Come in, Mr. Roberts. Grab yourself a seat."

He picked up the .45 from the table. Roberts' eyes bugged. "W-what's that?"

"A gun," the redhead said simply, going into his bedroom. He left the door open, flipped the gun on the bed. He kept Roberts in view while he dressed. If necessary, he could dive for the gun, and easily trigger a shot within two seconds.

He had figured on driving off Roberts with the astronomical fee. But Roberts hadn't even flinched, so all of this had to be a ruse. Somebody wanted the redhead somewhere. Was Roberts merely a messenger boy? Was he with the mob, the dumpy appearance a disguise?

The thought slowed Shayne. He searched his mind. Who in the world might want to lure him? He could think of no one.

He stuffed the .45 into the shoulder rig under his suitcoat as he re-entered the living room. Roberts sat cocked on the edge of

the overstuffed chair. He had not moved all the time Mike Shayne had been in the bedroom. But now he frowned deeply.

"I. . .I don't think a weapon will be necessary, Mr. Shayne."

"It is to me. Let's get on the way. Where are we going?"

"It's a motel across the city," Roberts said.

Shayne grunted. A nice out-of-the-way little joint, huh? he thought.

"My car is in the basement," the redhead said.

"I have a car out front."

"We travel in my heap. Together." Then, while riding the elevator into the basement, the detective asked, "How'd you happen to pick me, pal?"

"I found your name in the Yellow Pages."

Sure you did, Shayne thought as the elevator doors slid silently open in front of them. He had his coat open, right hand ready to flash to the gun. There could be assassins out there in the garage somewhere, trigger men who didn't give a damn about Roberts.

But they walked to the detective's convertible unmolested. Shayne's footsteps were loud in the silence of the garage. Roberts moved along with an occasional squish from the tennis shoes. The convertible motor purred and they were up out of the apartment-hotel garage onto nearly deserted N. E. Second Avenue in seconds.

Shayne kept an eye on the rear view mirror. No headlights came alive behind them.

He relaxed slightly, and shot an oblique glance at Roberts as his passenger gave directions.

The motel was a thirty-five minute drive from Shayne's apartment. It was a squatty, dark place on a heavily shadowed sidestreet far from a main thoroughfare.

Shayne was sure that in daylight it would be one of the ancient joints that probably had been built with high anticipation decades ago. But the city had grown in the wrong direction for the motel and hopes had been shattered. The units had suffered plenty of knocks through the years too, and no one with hammer and nails and paint had bothered to care.

Roberts pointed to a dark entry drive. Shayne turned in the convertible, coasted past a flat structure with a feeble yellow light inside. The office sign was dark, probably had ceased lighting up in the Fifties or so.

Roberts told Shayne to park. He braked in front of a sagging unit, punched off the brilliant headlights. He looked around, squinting hard against the darkness. There was a scattering of cars.

The detective was alive, every sense cocked. Silent danger signals were loud. The motel, the hour, the darkness seemed ideally designed for a ripoff.

"T-the place we want...is down there," Roberts said with a jerk of his thumb. "I purposely had you drive past it."

"Why?"

The bluntness jarred Roberts. "Well, I wasn't sure we should just drive up in front."

"Why?" Shayne snapped again.

"They might hear us, and be warned." The little man was obviously uncomfortable.

"Who's they?"

"My wife and..."

Roberts didn't finish and Shayne snorted, "Lover?"

"Y-yes."

"What happened to this big,

hot business meeting of yours?"

"Well, I didn't know if you would come. I was afraid—"

"You had reason to be. I don't like domestic cases, Mr. Roberts."

Roberts got out of the car. "Please, Mr. Shayne, don't leave me now!"

The redhead rolled from the seat into the darkness, while he kept a sharp eye for moving shadows. He figured the wife-lover story ranked with the business deal tale. Both were a lot of horse. But he hadn't earned a profitable reputation by being squeamish either.

And Roberts tweaked him. Roberts was as jumpy as a dog in a violent thunderstorm. Not the type of dude cold-eyed, gut-shooting mobsters would put faith in. Roberts, more and more, seemed a guy who might get caught up in self-made bungling constrictions. Still, he could be a helluva actor, or he could be a guy who was being blackmailed into being a lure.

Shayne took out the .45 and clamped it tight in his right fist as he followed Roberts toward a unit. If guns started spitting out of the blackness at them, he wanted to be able to get off one returning shot at least.

Roberts stopped at the unit door, turned to look at Shayne. Dim light came from behind the draped window at the redhead's shoulder. He flashed a look at a parked sedan that faced them and the unit. The sedan looked empty.

"Your show, feller," Shayne said, wiggling the .45 at Roberts.

Roberts knocked on the door and, with the third rap, the door opened a crack. Roberts stood frozen, fist in the air. Shayne inched the muzzle of the .45 slightly higher, waited.

But there was no movement anywhere, no attack: only quietness.

Shayne looked over Roberts and through the crack into the cheap room. All he saw was an unmade bed, thin carpeting, and a couple of articles of discarded female clothing.

He reached over Roberts and pushed the door wide open. No one leaped at them. No gunfire crackled. He saw a dumped purse on the bed, the contents strewn.

Roberts started to step forward, but Shayne nudged him aside. He entered the motel unit. There was no sound, no movement. He moved to the foot of the bed, inventoried the clothing here and there.

Then he looked through an open door into the bath.

"Roberts!" he snapped after a couple of seconds.

Roberts moved in beside him. Shayne waved the gun at the naked woman who dangled from the shower nozzle.

"Is that your wife?" the detective rasped.

Roberts lurched, doubled and retched.

III.

THE ROOM was hot. The dead, clammy air held a faint effluvium of decay. Mike Shayne used the muzzle on the .45 to tip back his hat, wiped the film of perspiration from his brow with his hand, and then remembered the door. He went to it, toed it shut. They didn't need someone dropping in for a nightcap.

He looked around. The place was a dump. The flooring was warped in spots, the dull brown carpeting threadbare beside the rickety bed. The walls were flowered with a myriad of stains that looked a hundred years old. There was a chipped end table supporting a bent lamp and a dusty seashell ashtray, a single straightback chair and a chest of drawers with a filmed mirror that was cracked across the top left corner.

The purse and the strewn female clothing were incongruous. The purse looked like genuine leather, was shiny black. Shayne checked labels in an orchid blouse and wrap-around skirt. The outfit hadn't come off a discount store rack.

He squatted and inventoried a pair of shoes without touching them. For an instant, he wished Lucy Hamilton was with him. Lucy could price the shoes within a couple of dollars, either way. But he really didn't need her. He already knew. The clothing and the room were eons apart.

He sighed, jammed the gun into its rig and went to the still-doubled Andrew Roberts Humpty Dumpty had added to the stains and the stench, copiously. But Roberts was dry-heaving now, and Shayne was impatient. He clamped large fingers on Roberts' shoulders and drew the man up.

Roberts bobbed and weaved. Shayne took him outside. "Suck some air, feller," he growled.

Roberts sucked while Shayne propped him. Then Shayne walked Roberts to the convertible and tucked him inside.

Shayne got behind the steering wheel, inventoried the motel area. There were many black patches and lumps, but everything seemed quiet. He lighted a cigarette and passed it to Roberts. Roberts pushed the cigarette aside. Shayne pulled deep, said, "Your wife, I assume."

It seemed five minutes before Roberts replied, "Y-yes It's. . .Kara."

"You kill her?"

Roberts said nothing.

Shayne smoked, pressed: "You killed her, then came to me for help. What kind of help do you

figure I can give you? You need cops, man."

"I didn't. . .kill her."

It seemed a debatable subject to the detective. But he was willing to listen. "So lay it out for me."

Roberts nervously shifted around on the seat, seemed to be weighing a too-heavy decision. "I. . ."

It was all he said. He clammed. Shayne snubbed out the cigarette in exaspeation. "Okay, so we roll to the cop-shop."

"No! P-please, just give me a few more seconds. That was a terrible shock in there."

"Uh-huh."

"Kara came here with a man tonight!" Roberts burst out. "I saw them!"

"You followed them here?"

"No, no, I was already here. I knew. . .where she would be coming. That is, when she left the house, I knew. . ."

Roberts drew a breath, seemed to attempt to put his thoughts and words in order. "Mr. Shayne, I've followed her on other nights. I didn't have to tonight. I knew she would come here."

"Let me get this straight," Shayne said. "Your wife has been having an affair. You've been aware of it. You've trailed her in the past. She and her boyfriend always came here. So tonight when she announced she was going out, you came directly here, parked down the street someplace, watched your wife and boyfriend drive in, take a unit. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's about it."

"About—what does that mean?" Shayne said.

"Well, this is. . .was a Tuesday night. Kara always went to her yoga classes on Tuesday and Thursday nights. She became interested in yoga about six, eight months ago."

"Except she really wasn't going to yoga classes, she was meeting a boyfriend?" Shayne said.

"Oh, she went to the classes, all right. but it was. . .well, afterward. . .I mean, she didn't get home some nights until early the next morning and. . ."

Roberts let the words dribble off again and Shayne picked them up: ". . .and you got suspicious about the hours she kept and one night you trailed her, discovered why she didn't come right home after class."

"Y-yes."

"You trailed them here many Tuesday and Thursday nights."

"Almost. . .every."

"How long has this been going on, Roberts?"

"Four or five months. I really can't recall."

"And you've been living with it? How come you didn't brace your wife, or this guy?"

Roberts took a few seconds be-

fore he said, "I've lived with this kind of thing since we married twenty-six years ago. There was a. . .restlessness about Kara. I never understood it, but. . ." He stopped—but then went on slowly:

"Well, a long time ago I learned to live with it. Kara always had a boyfriend somewhere. Never serious until now, understand. The others were sort of cat-and-mouse affairs, never long-lasting. You know, maybe a neighbor, a salesman, or a customer who came to the shop, someone at a cocktail party, maybe someone down from the North we'd meet at a boat party, that kind of thing.

"But this time. . .well, it's been going on steadily for months. I became frightened. I didn't know how to cope. I wanted to talk to her, let her know she wasn't fooling me. On the other hand, I was afraid that if I did she would leave me."

"You couldn't take that, huh?"

"No," Roberts said simply, "I could not."

Shayne drew a breath. "Roberts, in all honesty, I've never understood your kind of man. But that doesn't get us anywhere. So you tell me who the guy is and we'll—"

"Ramon Charra."

"Who's he?"

"Her yoga instructor."

Shayne—silent in mental gymnastics—used the thumb and forefinger of his left hand and tugged the lobe of his left ear in habit. Roberts' accusation had not surprised him. On the other hand, Roberts might be attempting to build something that did not exist.

What if the wife had been straight? What if there had not been yoga, a boyfriend? What if Roberts was creating all this to protect himself?

But if Roberts killed his wife, why would he bring her to a motel? Why not kill in their home, or drop her off a boat into the Atlantic, or sink her in the Everglades?

Okay, he brought, or got her to accompany him, to the motel to set the stage for his cover. So why hang her from a shower nozzle? And why come to a private eye in the middle of the night?

Shayne decided he needed a great deal more information. "Andy," he said conciliatorily, "if I am to help you, I have to know something about you, your business, your wife."

He let the words hang for Roberts to chew on. Familiarity was an ancient cop trick. Cops had learned long ago that the use of a first name sometimes poked a hole in a thick-skinned barrier.

Shayne waited, ears tuned to the man beside him while his eyes continued to sweep the dark lumps all around them. A killer

could be lurking out there. There seemed no sane reason a killer would remain in the area but Shayne knew that logic was not always a shield.

But his patience thinned fast as Roberts continued to remain silent. "Okay," the detective finally said, shooting fingers to the ignition key, "so you tell it to the police."

"No!"

It was a burst. Shayne froze. Roberts shifted around on the seat. "I'm just trying to. . .organize in my mind," he said, voice quivering.

"Just talk," Shayne said bluntly. "I'll do the organizing."

Roberts talked. He and a man named Lee Blake were in the job printing business, R and B Printing. The shop's production included almost anything printed: catalogues, circulars, pamphlets, ledgers. Roberts and Blake had met, become pals, during World War II. They had formed the business partnership after the war.

"I am the front office," Roberts explained, "the salesman, the business head. Lee is the expert in the mechanical end. Kara. . ." He hesitated, continued, "was our first, and only, secretary-bookkeeper. I married her."

She had been an orphan, got into trouble while still a kid. She had been unable to resist cars with keys carelessly left in the switch. She finally had been declared a juvenile delinquent, sent to a home for girls.

A representative of that home had appeared at R and B Printing one day, needed a job for a girl who had a natural talent for bookkeeping. Roberts and Blake had hired Kara Drew, and then Roberts had married her. There had been a marked difference in their ages.

"But we got along," Roberts added quickly. "No problems."

"Except boyfriends," Shayne said flatly.

Roberts sucked a loud breath, seemed on the brink of explosion again, then clicked his teeth. "All right," he finally conceded in a voice that was just audible, "I told you, Kara was restless. It was one of the reasons she

wanted to keep on working after we married, one of the reasons I allowed her to work."

"Uh-huh. Okay, any idea where this latest boyfriend, this Charra, hangs his hat?"

"He conducts classes in an apartment at The King on Flower Street. Apartment 9. It's on the third floor."

"And tonight you followed Charra and your wife here."

"I already was here when they arrived, Mr. Shayne. Parked down the street. That was around eleven, a few minutes after."

"It was dark at eleven o'clock. How can you be sure it was Charra with your wife?"

"Well, I've seen them here before," Roberts said.

"Have you ever seen your wife here with any other man?"

"Once, with a chap named Pat Hale."

"Who's he?" the redhead asked.

"A neighbor. . .the Hales live down the street. We used to be close friends, then one night. . .well, Nancy Hale and I caught Pat and Kara kissing. It was a party at our house, just a neighborhood gathering, and Pat and Kara were out in the back yard on the lawn and. . .Nancy put a quick end to all of that."

"Anyone else?"

"No one I can positively identify."

"Which you can't do tonight. You can't positively say it was Charra you saw with your wife. All you know is she has been having an affair with Charra. She has been going to his apartment for yoga lessons and then. . . Roberts, have you wondered why they would bother to drive to a cheap dump when they already were in his apartment?"

Roberts sat slumped. He said nothing. Shayne got out of the convertible, leaned in the open window. "She could've been out here with anyone tonight. Sit there and think about that while I check out a couple of things, okay?"

IV.

MIKE SHAYNE returned to the unit, went inside, resisted the temptation to go back outside immediately. He had to know if Roberts would bolt, given the opportunity. Roberts wouldn't stay free long. He was an amateur at hiding. He'd surface within a day or two.

That part wasn't important. The import was in the act. If Roberts ran, a detective could figure the boyfriend story had crumbled, he could call in a long-time friend, Will Gentry, chief of Miami police, and go home and get some sleep.

Shayne examined the room again. He stared at the contents of the dumped purse. There

seemed to be the normal paraphernalia one would find in a woman's purse, including car keys. But no wallet, no money. He went to the bath door, looked at the dangling corpse.

Why had the killer bothered to hang her up?

The question rankled. He went to the body. She was ringless. He studied ring marks on her fingers then, carefully, he put the edge of his hand under her chin and tipped her head up. She was grotesque. He allowed the head to loll again and walked out of the unit.

Shayne examined the car parked immediately in front of him. The door on the driver's side opened under his hand, a dashlight came on. He saw the slip of paper on the front seat, and examined it. The car had been rented, the signee penning the name Kara Roberts.

Frowning, Mike Shayne returned to his convertible. Roberts still sat hunched on the front seat.

"Does your wife own a car?" the detective asked.

"Yes."

"That isn't it down there."

"N-no. But it's the car she came here in tonight. She was driving it."

"It's a rental," Shayne said flatly.

"Is it? I thought. . ."

Roberts didn't finish the thought, and Shayne picked it up: ". . .that the car might belong to the boyfriend? He ran off. Wouldn't he leave in his car? Give me the make and license number of your wife's car."

"It's a Volks. Just an ordinary little bug. New last year. Blue." Roberts rattled off the license number.

Shayne digested that, then said, "Something about all of this stinks, Roberts. You say your wife and Charra came out here tonight. You saw them arrive, then came for me. I assume I was to be muscle, yank your wife out of this place, put Charra in his place if he beefed. On the other hand, you figure Charra is the kind of guy who would rob?"

Roberts didn't understand and Shayne continued, "The dumped purse on the bed, and your wife isn't wearing rings but there are ring marks on her fingers. Maybe your wife and her boyfriend had an argument, the boyfriend cut. Your wife could've been taking a shower, cooling down, cleansing, whatever.

"The big point is, Roberts —entry into this kind of motel unit is absurdly easy. The door has a snap lock. An experienced character would use a celluloid strip, insert it in the crack of the door, walk inside as if he had a key."

Roberts remained silent.

"A thief could've entered while

your wife was showering, and started ransacking. Your wife heard him, cried out. He panicked, killed her, took her rings and money and fled. You said you saw your wife arrive here around eleven, or shortly after. How long after that before you came for me?"

Roberts sniffed. "Well. . .I sat around out there on the street for maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, then went home. I thought I'd need money, a retainer, you know, to get you here. I always keep money around the house. I put it together, looked in the phone book, then went to your apartment."

Roberts sniffed again.

"And we got back out here around two," Shayne said. "So we've got two, maybe two-and-a-half blank hours. Plenty of time for her to get hit. And speaking of being hit. . ."

He let the words dribble off as he slid a hand up his front and inside his coat to the butt of the .45. He had caught the movement of the shadow in the corner of his eye. The shadow slithered up beside the open window from behind the detective, and arched suddenly. A head poked inside the car.

Shayne brought the muzzle of the gun up along the door swiftly, jammed the underside of a jaw and pinned the head between .45 and the rooftop.

The shadow gagged. "Agghhh."

Then the pinned man struggled. Steel-like fingers came up to clasp Shayne's gun wrist. The detective jammed. The fingers stilled.

Shayne growled, "Okay, back off. Take it easy, with your hands behind your head."

The shadow backed as if he was inches from a cliff edge, hands on the nape of his neck, elbows wide. He was a tall, lean shadow.

Shayne moved him to the hood of the convertible. "Take the position."

The guy pitched forward, put his palms flat against the hood, spread his legs wide and moved his feet back. He was arched now, in no position to make any quick moves.

"I see you've had experience at being properly searched, pal," Shayne rasped as he went over the man's body with his free hand. He did not find a weapon.

"Okay, stand, and start talking," said the redhead.

The tall man turned slowly, seemed to shake himself down. "Who the hell are you guys?" he said in a voice that grated. "You're trespassin'."

"You're the manager of this joint?" Shayne said.

"I'm the owner."

"What's your name?"

"Hermie Nolting. And, all of a sudden, I've got a hunch you ain't

fuzz. Blow, buster. I don't know what the hell you're doing here, but blow."

"You make a habit of walking around your place at three o'clock in the morning, checking things out, Hermie?"

"I do when I see two guys going in and out of a unit, sitting in a car, smokin' a butt, going back into the unit, sniffin' 'round a parked heap that don't belong to them."

"You've got a dead woman down there in that unit," the redhead said.

Nolting said nothing. Shayne prodded him. "Not interested?" He started walking the man to the unit.

"Oh, yeah, man," Nolting said, "I'm interested." As he noticed the unit to which he was being taken he said, "Kara Drew? I rented her that unit."

"Her name is Kara Roberts," said Shayne.

Nolting nodded. "Okay, but she was Kara Drew here. You get all kinds in my racket. I didn't catch your name."

"Mike Shayne."

Nolting was at the door. He looked over his shoulder. "I've heard of you, but I don't place you. You ever done a stretch?"

"Inside, pal."

They entered the unit. When Nolting saw the corpse all he said was, "Jesus."

He turned back into the main room. He looked mid-thirty but his hair was gray on top and salted generously in the sideburns and at the temples. He was lithe, looked in good physical condition in faded jeans, T-shirt and scruffed sandals. He was white of tooth, clear and suspicious of eye, leathery face remaining a mask as he inventoried Shayne.

"You're making me, man," Nolting said finally. "I can see it in your eyes."

Shayne grunted. "When did you get out of stir, Hermie?"

"Couple of years ago. I did seven of ten. Stolen heap rap. It's the only time I ever did a trick. My sis died while I was inside. She and her husband had this joint. They was killed in a car smashup. They left the place to me. It's all they had. You wanna make a case of that?"

"You've been operating the motel for a couple of years, huh? So I guess Kara Drew/Roberts is no stranger to you."

Nolting showed the edge of teeth. "It's still there in your eyes, man. Cut it. There ain't nothun to make."

"Except," Shayne said in a voice that grated, "we've got a good-looking dame who has been using your place for games and you're not a stupid jerk, Hermie. Mature woman, good car, good clothing, jewelry, maybe even flashing a little green, out here

for funsies. You tag her, keep an eye on her. And tonight you see a guy leave her in the middle of the night. Hmmm. Wonder what's in that for Hermie?

"Hermie figures: the dame and the guy have a beef, guy runs off, leaving dame all by her lonesome. Maybe drunk, maybe angry. Who knows? Worth checking out. You come down here, catch her in the shower. But she's gonna scream.

"You smack her, kill her, hang her, strip the rings, rifle the purse, go back over to your place to settle the nerves, do a little thinking. Where to get rid of a body? In the meantime, two guys show, move in and out of the unit, you decide to fake it out, find out what the hell gives. You—"

"Dumb reasoning, Shayne," Nolting interrupted in a raspy voice. "I'd have dumped her in Biscayne pronto, got rid of her." Shayne stared at him. "Man, why would I hang her up in the shower?"

Shayne sucked a breath, stuffed the .45 into its rig under his coat. "Yeah, Hermie. Why? Okay, you can stand heat from the cops? They're in."

Nolting seemed to debate, then mumbled, "Yeah, I've got clean toes. You a private snooper, man?"

"Uh-huh."

"Figures. Okay, you wanna call the fuzz from my place? It's the only telephone in the joint."

"Yeah."

But outside the unit, Hermie Nolting turned abruptly on Shayne, slammed flat hands against the detective's arm and whipped a foot across Shayne's ankles.

Shayne sprawled with an oath as Hermie Nolting bolted off into the night and quickly and quietly disappeared.

V.

JOE LYNN was a veteran night trick cop. Mike Shayne knew Lynn from other days and had always found the policeman cooperative.

Detective-Lieutenant Lynn was a medium-statured, mild-mannered man with a lantern jaw, a gum chewer with a hulk of a son who played professional football with the Chicago Bears. Lynn's secret hope was the boy would someday be traded to the Miami Dolphins.

The other cops were veterans too. Collectively, they'd viewed hundreds of corpses. After awhile, murder became routine, and murder got boring. Of course, this one was a little different: the victim wasn't a bad-looking dame, and naked. Also, who hangs a corpse from a shower nozzle?

Lynn motioned Shayne outside the unit. Miami had grayed.

Dawn was approaching. The sky was clear. It was to be another hot day, Lynn commented, putting hips against a fender of the rent car. He popped a fresh stick of gum into his mouth and the lantern jaw worked methodically as he looked around.

There was a scattering of curious people. They shuffled around at a distance, most of them half-dressed. Somehow the police cars, arriving sans sirens wailing and red lights whirling, still had attracted a crowd. Neither Shayne nor Lynn were surprised. Both knew some people smelled police cars.

"I've got to take your client in, Mike," said Lynn.

Shayne grimaced. "I'm not sure he is my client, Joe. Finding his wife's body may have changed things. He probably is going to want to invest his dough in a good lawyer now. I'm certainly not holding him to that crazy two thousand dollar fee. I'll keep a couple of bills, no more."

"How are you figuring him, Mike? You think he has been leveling with you? He could've killed her, then come for you, though God knows I don't follow his thinking."

Shayne had speculated with Lynn earlier and Lynn had listened, absorbed, not asking any questions. Shayne tugged at his ear lobe. "I don't think Roberts has got it in him to kill, Joe. At

the moment, I'll lean to a boyfriend or to Nolting."

"I've got an All Points out on Hermie," Lynn said. "We'll turn him up. Incidently, the computers make him like he told you: a one time loser on a stolen car rap. He's been busted on a couple of other suspicions, but nothing stuck."

"There's the missing wallet, and the rings. Nolting could've moved in on her, she resisted."

"Or somebody could want us to think robbery was motive," Lynn said as Shayne nodded. "Boyfriend," Lynn went on. "Killed, then tried to figure a way out."

"I assume you're already after Ramon Charra," Shayne queried.

"If Charra went from here to his own bed, he's going to be getting up early this morning," Lynn nodded.

"It could be someone else, of course. I have the impression that Kara Roberts was not exactly immune to variety."

"Adventure," mused Lynn, "sometimes can complicate."

Shayne lighted a cigarette, exhaled. "I need to talk to Roberts for a few more minutes, preferably without your beagle."

Lynn pushed away from the rented car, waved a hand to the fat man who was leaning against the motel unit in front of Shayne's convertible. The fat man waddled toward them.

Shayne said, "Thanks, Joe," and went to the convertible, slid in beside the subdued Roberts. "Lieutenant Lynn wants you to go with him."

Roberts looked mildly startled. "Where?"

"To headquarters. He has to ask questions."

"But can't you answer his questions for me?"

"I'd take a lawyer with me, not a private investigator," said Shayne.

"But I've hired you!"

"Mr. Roberts," Shayne said flatly, "I don't see where there's much more I can do for you. And about that two thousand. if—"

"No! I want you!"

Shayne looked Roberts square in the blueberry eyes. "I'm a business man, Roberts," he said. "In my business, I need people like you. On the other hand, I don't gouge, cheat or con. So I'm telling you: the police will find your wife's killer. That doesn't mean I'm turning down business. It means I'm putting this case on line. At the moment, I don't think you need me. You need a lawyer."

"But I want you! Doesn't that count?"

Shayne shrugged, giving in. "Standard fee. Three hundred a day, plus expenses."

Roberts waved a hand in a move of desperation. "Just find this Nolting person. . .or Ramon Charra. . .or whoever killed her."

"What if I find you?"

Roberts sat frozen. The blueberry eyes hardened. "Mr. Shayne, if I had wanted my wife dead I could have picked a night Kara and I were alone at home, I could have pushed her into the deep end of our backyard swimming pool. Kara couldn't swim a stroke, had a fear of water. Some would question her drowning, yes, but who could prove I pushed her?"

"You got a lawyer?"

"Not a personal attorney, no. We have a firm we use, for the business. But why do I need an attorney, Mr. Shayne? I'll ans-

wer all of the questions I can for the lieutenant. I have absolutely no fear of implicating myself. I have nothing to hide."

"Okay, it's your ball game, Roberts. Hustle on down there to Lynn. I'll be in contact with you later today."

"I really don't see why I have to go anywhere with the police. I can answer questions here."

"That's Lynn's ball game."

Roberts got out of the convertible slowly. Then he poked his head through the open window. "Mr. Shayne, what will the police do with Kara?"

"They'll want to conduct some tests."

"But can't I bury her?"

"Sure, in time. Take it up with Lynn, huh?"

"Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

Shayne began to feel as if he were a seeing-eye dog on a leash. "Roberts," he said with forced patience, "let me get away from here. Her killer isn't going to come back and throw himself into our arms."

The redhead cruised toward downtown Miami at a relaxed speed, his mind on murder rather than driving. The driving was reflexive. Mike Shayne wondered about Nolting. Why did Nolting run and where would Nolting run to? He thought about Ramon Charra. Had the cops found Charra in his bed?

His mind filled with the image of Kara Roberts sprawled from a shower nozzle. Why the hell would anyone bother to hang her as if she were a side of beef? And then there was her husband, a mouse of a guy, really, saddled with a wayward wife and unable to rid himself of her.

Shayne shook his head. He had a helluva cast of characters: a mouse, an adulteress, a yoga teacher who moonlighted as a lover, and an ex-con looking for a cave to hide in. The cast alone was enough to tax credibility. On the other hand, the incredible was where he lived the hardest. He thrived where others gave in to befuddlement and confusion.

He yanked his hat and suddenly paid attention to driving. He wheeled to the car rental agency, found it closed as he had expected. The agency was an 18-hour operation. He cruised the sidestreets near the agency, finally spotted a blue Volks with the right license number. It was in a stall in a theater parking lot.

Shayne sat in the lot for a few minutes, fingers drumming on the steering wheel. The morning was an orange color now, the sun not quite up out of the Biscayne horizon. The air was fresh, carried a sea tang. Andrew Roberts, it appeared, need not have been so much a mouse where his spouse was concerned.

She apparently had wanted to keep the security he provided. Else why the bother, the expense

and the use of a rental car? The blue Volks looked perfectly capable of taking her to a rendezvous. If she was unafraid of discovery, didn't care if her husband knew of her cuckoldry, why switch cars?

Still, two things rankled. One, Kara Roberts had been careful to change cars, but she had not moved around to various motels. Why? Had the car switch been enough to give her a sense of security?

Two, all of this seemed to be in reverse of the norm. Why hadn't her lover/lovers provided transportation?

Shayne decided he needed more of an insight into Andrew and Kara Roberts. He found a public phone booth, looked up the number for Lee Blake, dialed. Blake surprised the detective. He picked up the receiver on the second ring and he sounded as if it was noon instead of near six o'clock in the morning.

Shayne rolled off some quick explanations and Blake replied, "I was just heading out for my morning jog, Mr. Shayne. You caught me going out the door. But I'll wait for you. Drive out. I'll have bacon and eggs on the table when you arrive. How's Andy doing—holding up? Jesus, what a thing to happen! But, listen, I'll get Mason Duncan out of bed, get him tracking down to police headquarters. You know Mason? He's a damn good criminal lawyer."

Shayne knew the name and reputation of Mason Duncan. The man was supposed to be a little more than a "damn good criminal lawyer." He was supposed to be the best in the city, one of the five best in the United States.

The redhead put the phone together, stood unmoving for several seconds. A printer and a hot-shot attorney on a first name basis? Interesting.

Or was Lee Blake only a name-dropper?

VI.

THE AREA was neat, modest-looking and quiet in the early morning hour. The houses looked pre-World War II, built with quality rather than quantity in mind. They looked solid, kept.

Mike Shayne brake in front of a wide bungalow. A strip of good sidewalk bisected a healthy green yard. The concrete went up to a recessed front door. That door was open and a man attired in a gray sweatsuit similar to those worn by trackmen filled most of the opening.

Lee Blake was waiting for Shayne. The detective was ushered into an airy front room that was furnished with squatty, masculine appointments. The room was clean, uncluttered ta-

bles polished to a high gloss. The house seemed the kind most people would delight in: modernized and comfortable.

Lee Blake probably was near fifty years of age, manicured and neat even in the baggy sweatsuit. He looked as if he was a man who took care of his body. He had dark hair and dark eyes, an unlined face and a quick grin. His teeth against the sunbrowned coloring of his face were very white.

"Breakfast on the patio, Mr. Shayne," he said. "Let's go out and drink a cup of coffee. You look as if you could use one."

Shayne sat at a round metal table in the shadow of a roofed stone patio behind the bungalow. Beyond the stones thick grass glistened in sunshine. A refreshing breeze bathed Shayne's face as Blake poured black coffee from a silver pot into heavy mugs. Blake remained standing as he took a mug, sipped. Shayne had the impression he was being inventoried thoroughly.

Then Blake broke into an easy grin. "Eggs scrambled with a bit of ham okay?"

"Fine," nodded the redhead.

"I'm it around here. No wife. Never have seen the value of having one."

Shayne waved the mug, drank strong coffee, sat in contemplation after Blake had disappeared into the house.

Blake and Roberts. Opposites. How and why had they ever clicked? What would attract one to the other? And Blake's relaxed manner on the morning after his partner's wife, the office secretary-bookkeeper, had been murdered.

Where was the concern, the puzzlement, the curiosity about that killing? Blake had not asked a single question. He seemed to accept Kara Roberts' killing as he might accept a flat tire on a parked automobile.

Shayne reflexively lighted a cigarette, looked for an ashtray, found none. He flipped the dead match into the grass, sat back. Blake appeared with the food on a roll cart. He saw Shayne's cigarette, went into the house again, returned with a sparkling glass ashtray. Shayne suddenly found himself hungry.

"I called Mason Duncan," Blake said. "He'll help. You want to fill me in on what happened?"

Shayne unloaded. He included theories and speculations, his own and those of Detective-Lieutenant Joe Lynn. Plates were soon clean and second cups of coffee were poured when he finally finished. Blake sat back, his brown face creased in a frown now. He waved off an offered cigarette, seemed to be in deep contemplation as Shayne lit a new butt.

"If you'll take one off the top of my head, Shayne," Blake

said, "I think this Charra is your boy." He sat forward, propped himself on elbows, shook his head. "Jeez, I'm having trouble accepting the fact that Kara is dead, murdered. I guess I expect to go to the shop later and find her at the office desk when I walk in.

"Now that I think about it, I can't recall a morning that she hasn't been at the desk when I arrive. She and Andy always went in at eight, got the orders and deliveries for the day lined up. I go at nine. They leave around four in the afternoon, I'm there until five, sometimes six, seven o'clock, depends on how the production is going, what we've got in the pot."

"You and your partner have known each other a long time," said Shayne casually. "I guess you know how to work together."

"Hell, man, Andy and I go back to World War II. We were pups, but we were pals, and we learned how to mesh. We're alive because we did. Many a night we went on patrol together, just the two of us. We often couldn't see each other, but somehow we always knew where the other guy was, what he was doing. You know how that is with some guys?"

"I know," the redhead nodded.

"Andy's a fooler," Blake continued. "Maybe that's why he can sell. I mean a tough print job, a job a potential customer isn't sure he needs or wants. Andy is particularly good with that kind of challenge. I don't know how he does it. I can't, and couldn't. Some guy starts handing me excuses for not wanting something and I say, 'Okay, you don't have to convince me, you've got your reasons.'

"I go after the next potential. But not Andy. He hangs tough, gets an order, or there's a damned solid reason he doesn't get it. The customer doesn't get off his hook with a flimsy excuse. He has his devious little ways, he goes round-about sometimes, but most of the time he gets what he goes after."

"Including a dead wife?"

Blake looked Shayne straight in the eye. "No, Andy never would want Kara dead. She was a witch, Shayne, a genuine, blood-sucking, conniving, pleasure-seeking witch—but Andy also happened to be in love with her. I think he went out of his tree for her the first day she came to work for us. God, that seems an awfully long time ago now."

He paused thoughtfully, then looked at Shayne. "Anyway, he wouldn't want her dead. He wouldn't kill her, or have her killed. She could do anything to him. He'd take it. Maybe the guy's got a little masochism in him. I don't know. He's got to be a little kinky. Else why would he

put up with all of her lovers?"

"You know all about them, huh?"

"No, not all about them. But I know they existed. All women have lovers, sooner or later, sure. All people do, I guess, male and female, but with Kara. . .well, she ran to excess, in my opinion. But like I say, the guy was ape about her, always has been." Blake shook his head.

"And he knew about the lovers."

"You seem to want to press that point, Shayne. Doesn't mean a thing. Andy'd figure a way to get around those guys, and manage to keep her."

"But what if she told him she was going to leave him and there wasn't anything he could do or say to stop her?" Shayne asked.

"She wouldn't do that, Shayne. Not Kara. You see, she liked to have both sides of her bread buttered. Which is exactly the way she had it with Andy. He was the money and sometimes the lover. The other guys were lovers. Period. No bucks. She wouldn't want to lose Andy. He was the guy who bought her silk underwear."

"I have the distinct impression, Blake, that you didn't like Kara Roberts."

"You're right on, Shayne. No love lost here, because of what she did to Andy. I've always had the impression she held the guy in contempt—from a distance, of course."

"You and Roberts ever discuss this?" Shayne asked.

"Why would we? Kara was his problem, certainly not mine. Sure, I'd have yakked with him if he'd wanted to rap. But he never has talked about his personal life with Kara, not with me. I think he knows how I feel about her. As long as she did a good job at the plant, stuck with the books, I had no bitch. And. . ." Blake hesitated, then waved a hand. ". . .this may sound a little chintzy, but she saved us a salary. Know what I mean?"

Shayne said nothing.

"We're all out for the buck, Shayne."

"I guess," said Shayne, "you and your partner are not considering bankruptcy."

Blake sat like stone for a moment, then broke into a wide grin. "If you're really interested in our condition, Shayne, you can dig up some tax records. But I'll save you steps. Andy and I gross around $200,000 annually. That gross—not necessarily the profit—has been going up steadily. We have expenses, too, of course, but we're satisfied."

"You have a comfortable place here," the detective nodded.

"And a clear title," Blake said significantly. Then he grinned again and stood. "Want to take a look around? Come on, I'll give

you a cook's tour. Want to show you my shop, at least."

Shayne followed Blake to an end of the house that opened into a double garage. The garage had been converted into a tiny, neat print shop, complete with a small press.

Blake beamed. "It's my shop away from the shop. I tinker here, experiment. Sometimes I come up with something that can be sold at the office, something we can produce on a mass scale. This area had a big role in my decision to buy the house. Since I don't drive it was perfect for conversion."

Shayne turned back into the house, lighted a cigarette, then couldn't find an ashtray. Blake produced one from a polished sideboard. "I'm a loner, Shayne," he grinned. "I jog, play golf, fish, swim and print. I've been a printer all of my life. My father was a newspaper printer in the days before computers and electronic production. It's where he got to know Mason Duncan. I'll bet you didn't know Duncan used to be a printer. That was a long time ago. He finally earned a law degree and went on to bigger and better things, of course."

"I didn't know," Shayne admitted.

"I'm telling you all of this because I think you are curious about me," Blake said with a sage, one-sided grin.

"Yeah," said the redhead. "And among other things, I'm wondering if you might have had any reason to want Kara Roberts dead."

Blake kept the grin, pinched the tip of his nose. "Finally."

"Finally?" Shayne arched a shaggy eyebrow.

Blake laughed gently. "I didn't kill her, Shayne. And I'm not even offended by your thinking there was that possibility. I didn't like her, I thought she was eating the guts out of my friend Andy Roberts, but I didn't kill her. I'll go to her funeral. I won't be sad, but I'll be there."

Shayne grunted, moved toward the front door. Blake trailed him. "You going after this Charra now?" he wanted to know.

"The cops probably are already talking to him."

Shayne opened the door, stepped outside to sunshine that held a promise of high noon heat. Blake remained in the shadow of the doorway. He shook his head, looked thoughtful. "And Andy was on a stakeout. God, the misery the poor bastard has been suffering. Imagine, sitting in a car down a dark street in the middle of a night and seeing his wife and this Charra going into a sleazy motel unit."

"I didn't say it was Charra, Blake. I said Roberts saw his wife and a man go into the unit."

"Well," said Blake, moving out into the sunlight. He sniffed deep, looked around. "I'll be at the plant later this morning. Andy, I assume, will not be in, and we've got orders coming out our ears. So I may be there all night tonight, too, trying to keep things moving. I'll also check on Andy in another hour or so, talk with Mason Duncan."

"I'll be in touch, Blake."

"Anytime," the printer said, moving back into the shade.

VII.

MIKE SHAYNE drove to his Flagler Street office. Lucy Hamilton had just opened for the day and was sorting a stack of mail at her desk.

She cocked her head slightly, brown curls glinting, eyes curious, as she looked up at the redhead. He grinned for her. She was tonic, like cool raindrops splattering on sizzling bald head.

"You're faking, Michael," she said. "You don't feel that good. You've been up all night."

Shayne chuckled. Perception was Lucy's forte. It was one of the reasons they were a team. Like Roberts and Blake had been/were a team? he thought, sobering. He said, "I'm going to sack out for a few hours, Angel."

"Without even telling me what—"

Shayne briefed her. Then he said, "I'll dictate it all this afternoon."

"All right, Michael. I'll have the file open."

He turned to leave, yanked open the office door, and facing him found a neat young man. The young man looked mildly surprised, then entered. "Mr. Michael Shayne?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Donald Kelly."

"Please talk to my secretary, Mr. Kelly. I'm tied up at the moment."

The young man shifted a gleaming briefcase from one

hand to the other as Shayne moved to sidestep him.

"On another occasion I might appreciate that opportunity, Mr. Shayne," said the young man, his eyes darting to Lucy. Shayne thought he saw appreciation in the glance. "But this morning it is imperative that I talk to you. I represent Mr. Mason Duncan, the attorney. I am an associate. I have just left Mr. Andrew Roberts. I believe he has employed you. I have heard Mr. Roberts, now I need to hear you. Can your other appointment be delayed?"

Shayne permitted himself a mental vision of the waiting bed in his cool apartment. Briefly, he imagined himself standing under the pelting of a hot, then cold shower, saw himself pad naked and damp to the bed, sprawl face down, spread and find immediate sleep.

But he was a private eye. With a reputation and a client to protect. "It isn't anything pressing, Kelly," he said in a gravel voice.

"Good," smiled the young man. "I thought for a moment there you might be harboring ideas about going somewhere and getting some sleep. I understand you have been up all night."

It was twenty minutes after nine o'clock and the morning sun already was hot before Shayne piloted the convertible toward his apartment-hotel. Kelly had been filled in and had gone off to report to Mason Duncan, but not without asking Lucy Hamilton to lunch with him that noon.

She had accepted, which was good. Lucy would get an insight into the thinking of Donald Kelly/Mason Duncan, defense attorneys, and could pass it on to her boss.

Shayne drove as fast as the law and traffic allowed these slower days, but cheated a little here and there. He was tired. A shower and a couple of hours sleep would bolster him.

Roberts had been told by the police to go home, according to Kelly. The redhead had already decided he needed to go over the entire case with Roberts again. He might pick up a loose thread, something he had missed, or something new, something that would take him to a killer. But he'd catch Roberts after his nap.

He had showered and was padding toward his bed when the door buzzer sounded. He stopped, groaned. He'd ignore the buzzing. No, it might be Roberts. Maybe Roberts had decided to confess, didn't know how.

Peter Painter was at Shayne's door. He was alone. He looked mildly surprised at Shayne's attire, towel knotted at his waist, then he curled a thin upper lip in an undisguised sneer and pushed past Shayne into the front room of the apartment.

Shayne slammed shut the door.

Peter Painter was a small, delicate-looking man with a threadlike mustache and a habit of moistening an index finger and stroking that black line. He also was an impeccable dresser, a man with an undisguised prejudice against private detectives, a pompous, overbearing ass, in Shayne's estimation—and a cop. Peter Painter was chief of detectives in Miami Beach.

Now Painter crossed the front room and looked into the bedroom. He dampened the mustache as he returned. "I thought Miss Hamilton might be here," he said.

Shayne steeled himself, remained silent.

Painter's eyes hardened, became glistening black, little dots. "I've got a DOA, knocked down on one of my streets by a hit-and-run early this morning, Shayne. I've got an ID: Herman Nolting, an ex-con. I've got a couple of witnesses. Nolting was at a street-corner phone booth, left it, was moving across the street, was smacked down, didn't even yell. I've also got a strip of paper found in his trouser pocket. Your name and phone number are scribbled on that strip of paper. I want to know why."

Shayne yanked his door open, held it wide. "Beat it, Painter."

The chief of detectives flushed, shuffled, stroked the mustache. "I can haul you in on suspicion of knocking, or *having* Nolting knocked down!"

"Fly!"

"Why was Nolting on the Beach, Shayne? What did he do over there? What was he after? Why did he call you?"

"He planted a string of bombs. All up and down the island, Painter. He called to tell me to watch out my window if I wanted to see a helluva explosion. They're timed to go off simultaneously."

"Shayne," seethed Painter, "I swear, as a policeman and as a private citizen, I'll see you behind bars!" And then the little man surprised Shayne. He walked out of the apartment.

Shayne stood in the entry, staring after Painter until he disappeared inside the elevator. Shayne went to the telephone, dialed a private number at Miami Police headquarters. Will Gentry—the chief of police, a longtime friend, a man the redhead had worked with on many cases—answered and listened as Shayne briefed him on the events.

Shayne closed out the briefing with: "Painter's on High Charge, Will. I don't get it. If somebody had rolled a corpse in his front door, I might understand. But Nolting apparently was a hit-and-run victim, no more."

"Mike," Gentry said, "I've just finished reading the overnight reports. Those included the Kara Roberts killing. I've talked to Joe Lynn, but I'm still organizing in my mind. She's one of four homicides we had. Maybe she's more important than the other three. I don't know. I will know inside the hour, after I talk to some of my other men. I don't know this Nolting, got no idea who the hell he is.

"Okay, so we've got a sheet on him. I'll get it from the computers. Maybe that will make him important. As for Painter's frame of mind. . .Christ, Mike, I hate to say this, but he's in a contest. . .ah, sorta."

"Huh?"

"The FBI report on crime in the United States comes out next month. Things have been quiet on the Beach the last year. Those boys over there probably are going to rank high in crime reduction and any little thing that might tip the—"

"Don't say any more, Will," Shayne interrupted. "I may heave."

"I want to see you sometime today about this Roberts thing," Gentry growled. "But, for the moment, how did Nolting shape up as a suspect?"

"The knockoff took place in his motel. He's an ex-con. He bolted. I could have scared him, the prospect of cops could have scared him, or you can buy the speculation: He saw the boyfriend haul in the middle of the night, he knew who was left down there inside the unit, he knew she was alone, he moved in, was rebuffed. He killed, then tried to set it up as a B&E."

"Took time to hang up his victim on a shower nozzle though."

"Yeah, I know. . .it stinks, Will."

"The husband?"

"He had opportunity, there's no doubt about that." Shayne said. "Most people would figure he had reason, too."

"And then there's this . . .what's his name. . . Ramon Charra? Is he a lover? Lynn's people didn't turn him out, incidently. So at the moment, he ranks high on Lynn's list, naturally."

"He just went up a notch on mine, too."

"He killed and he's running? Maybe. That'd keep things pretty simple, Mike. Any other prospects?"

"There's a dude named Pat Hale, but I haven't checked him out. Lives down the street from Roberts. He and Kara Roberts at one time supposedly had a little thing going. At least, that's Roberts' thinking. On the other hand, it could've been just one of these situations of neighborhood couples getting together too often, too many little Saturday

night clambakes, a little mousing once in a while out in the grass.

"Anyway, Roberts also claims this Hale's wife cooled her husband, put him back on the straight and narrow. Supposedly, Hale and Kara Roberts reverted to being no more than neighbors again. I plan on doing a little sniffing in that corner, but there's another corner, too."

Shayne paused in contemplation and Gentry said, "Yeah?"

"The partner," said the redhead. "Lee Blake. Bachelor, living medium-class to better-than-medium, has a nice home, appears to be somewhat of a loner, didn't like Kara Roberts, never has, freely admits the dislike.

"On the other hand, he and Roberts appear to be very close friends in addition to being business partners, dates to World War II, but what's interesting to me, Will, is the guy doesn't drive. Non-drivers are few these days. Now, if this Blake just happened to be a lover, too, it might help clear up this business of the Roberts woman driving a rental car."

"One of Lynn's men has talked to the rent agency people, Mike, discovered a pattern. She's been renting every Tuesday and Thursday night for weeks."

Shayne grunted. "Which clicks with her yoga nights."

"Yeah. Drop in this afternoon. Lynn could have Charra by then."

VIII.

MIKE SHAYNE put the phone together, lighted a cigarette and sat back in the deep chair in thought. Nolting's death tormented him. Had it been accidental or intentional?

The redhead speculated: What if the unknown lover, the killer, had been wary of Nolting? What if the lover had suspicioned, or knew, that he had been spotted by Nolting at one time or another?

Would the lover return to the motel, say, in his own car, with an intent to rub out Nolting too? Could he have been so fortunate as to drive up to the motel at exactly the time Nolting was on the run? Could he have trailed Nolting over to Miami Beach, caught him crossing a street from a phone booth?

Shayne left the chair and banged a fist against his meaty thigh. Too much coincidence, too much luck involved. He didn't like the speculation.

Nolting's death probably had been an accident, the driver of the death car panicking. Nolting probably had become frightened at the prospect of cops descending on his place, and had run.

Then he had collected his wits,

decided to seek help. He had just met Shayne, a private eye. He went into a phone booth, attempted to call, failed to get an answer, had copied the name and number from the phone book, walked off in deep thought, wasn't paying attention as he crossed the street, and was smacked down.

Shayne dressed. Sleep was out of the question. Too many tumblers clinking around loose in his mind. And one of the tumblers had the name Ramon Charra stamped on it in big red letters.

The detective found The King to be a shiny glass highrise apartment building, carefully tailored for the wealthy elderly, the paper-rich executive, tasteful live-together. The kind of place where miniature golf and sunbathing were offered on the roof, tennis and swimming in the basement.

Shayne rode a swift, self-service elevator to the third floor, stepped off into deep red carpeting. He walked the long stem of an L-shaped corridor, his steps not making a sound, found Number 9 to be a corner apartment. He lifted a finger to punch a button, then froze.

The man seemed to have appeared out of nowhere in the short side of the L. He moved toward Shayne swiftly. He was a heavy man with a crooked nose. Dark eyes swept the detective, reflected nothing. The man nodded, remained silent, turned down the long stem. He went to the elevator, entered and disappeared.

Shayne grunted. The man had been wearing a sixty dollar suit with sags in it here and there. The suit didn't belong to The King. It belonged to one of Joe Lynn's cops. Shayne punched the button and the door was opened by a polished woman of middle years who still had tight skin and firm breasts.

She wore silver-black hair high, every strand in its proper place and held as if pasted. Yet there was a naturalness about the hair, as there was about the woman.

She was relaxed, midly curious, and looked as if she had never known discomfort. Slightly sleepy in eye and lip, full-legged, full-bodied, she was attired in white shirt top, taut, livid purple pants, black Chinese slippers. Her bare ankles, hands, throat and face were tanned a healthy brown.

"Yes?" she purred.

"Ramon Charra."

An eyebrow lifted. "You are another policeman?"

"No."

The eyebrow jiggled, then remained aloft. Gray eyes studied him, asked silent questions, pondered, then decided. "I think you are. Why do you lie? But I'll tell

you as I told the other man: Ramon is not here. He had an engagement last evening. I don't know where. I suspicion, however, that it was with some young, innocent wench somewhere. Ramon is quite a carnivorous young animal, as you may not know, a purloiner to the unwary, as they say."

"And you are?"

Her smile was crooked. "His bank," she said, her smile widening. "But not unwary, and certainly not his mother. And who are you?"

"Not his father," Shayne said, and smiled, too.

"Excellent! If you are not his father, then you don't have to worry about him, do you?" The woman closed the door in Shayne's face. He cursed, reached, but didn't clamp.

He knew it already to be a futile attempt. The knob wouldn't turn. The woman had been quick, had surprised him. He moved out, driving his heels down hard into the red carpeting.

"Hey?"

The summons was soft, but he whirled. The woman had stepped into the corridor, one hand on the jamb. Her head was cocked slightly, eyes inventorying minutely now.

"Come on in," she said. "I think I need to talk to you."

She disappeared, left the door open. Shayne entered a richly-

appointed apartment. The front room was huge, all other rooms closed off. The woman stood with her back to him. She was at a long, marble coffee table, lighting a cigarette.

She turned, looked him square in the eye. "My name is Rhonda Farmer. I am a divorcee, three times. Originally I was an Ambronski, then Wellington, O'Claire and Farmer, in that order. We made it, my husbands and I. At one time, we made it. But none of it lasted. And now I have Ramon. I can afford to keep him. Ambronski out of East Harlem didn't contribute, of course, but Wellington, O'Clair and Farmer have.

"In a sense, they've given me Ramon, which isn't going to last either. But at the moment I do have him and I'm worried. I'm not ready to lose him. He's good

for me. So what in the hell is all of this crazy business about murder, and the Roberts wench, and some dumpy motel, and. . ."

She smoked suddenly, looked frightened. "Oh, hell, I heard some of it on the radio this morning! But who are you? What do you want with Ramon? I know you're not a cop. I sense that much about you."

"Michael Shayne. Private investigations."

The cigarette stopped halfway to her lips. "Ah." The gray eyes swept him again, became calculating. She smoked. "Investigations. That makes you a man for hire, I assume. All right, Mr. Shayne, I want to hire you. Ramon didn't kill the Roberts wench. He wasn't with her last night."

"He was right here with you, huh? All night."

The gray eyes hardened slightly. "No," she said slowly, shaking her head. She smoked quickly, turned from the detective, began to pace. She stopped to snub out the cigarette, then looked at Shayne headon.

"Ramon finished with the Roberts wench weeks ago. Oh, she still came here for yoga two nights a week, but he finished with her. He. . ." She hesitated, lips thinning, then plunged on. ". . .has a new interest. Her name is Cindy Markham. She's a cat and very young. . ."

Rhonda Farmer shut off the words suddenly, returned to the marble coffee table, lighted a fresh cigarette. Shayne said, "Kara Roberts was here last night?"

The woman hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, but she left around ten. And before you jump to conclusions, Cindy Markham was here, too. It was yoga night you know. The class broke up around ten. Ramon stayed until almost eleven, maybe eleven-thirty. He spent the night with Cindy Markham." She glared at Shayne as though challenging him.

"No doubts on that score," he asked.

"None."

"Why no question?" Shayne said.

"She's his thing at the moment. She'll join the ranks of the Roberts wench and the others before long, but for now she's his thing."

"Only you survive, huh?"

"That's because I am the keeper, Mr. Shayne, not the kept."

"How come?" Rhonda Farmer cocked her head in silent question. "How come you keep on keeping with the knowledge that—"

"Oh. Come with me, Mr. Shayne." She went to a closed door, opened it, snapped on a soft ceiling light. Shayne looked over

her coiffed head into a luxurious study. A huge mural looked back at him.

In the painting, the young man looked Mexican, bronzed, sleek, knowing and slightly amused. He stood tall and straight and lithe, the smooth face highlighted by even white teeth and glowing dark eyes. The man looked arrogant.

"Charra?" said Shayne.

"Animal," breathed Rhonda Farmer. She snapped off the light, returned to the front room, closed the door softly. "But not a murderer, Mr. Shayne. Prove it to the police for me, please. I don't want Ramon hurt."

Shayne grunted, yanked at his ear. "If he was where you say he was, *all night,* no sweat."

"He was there," she said confidently. "Eleventh floor. Apartment 27."

"He doesn't stray far, huh? Is he there now?"

"He isn't there. And I didn't tell the cops where to find him."

Shayne went to the door, stopped, looked back at Rhonda Farmer. "One question, doll. When was the last time you were outside this apartment?"

She frowned. "Yesterday afternoon."

"I thought you might've figured a way to get rid of competitors."

She bit her lower lip in contemplation for a few seconds. Then she said, "I did, Mr. Shayne. A long time ago. I merely buy Ramon back."

Shayne rode the silent elevator up to the eleventh floor, poked a forefinger against a buzzer, kept the finger on the button until the door opened.

He was confronted by a small girl who was very pretty. Dark hair hung below her shoulders, was pulled back from an unpainted, elfin face. Dark eyes were solemn. Dark skin held a glow. She was very trim, very smooth, not even the suggestion of a wrinkle. She was very naked too.

And she held a tiny gun in her right hand.

She brought the gun up, put it in Shayne's palm, stepped back, held the door wide open. "I've been waiting a very long time for you, Mr. Policeman," she said in a lilting voice. "I am very tired."

Ramon Charra lay curled in a fetal position on the carpeting of the front room. There was an ugly-looking brown-black hole in the side of his head, just behind the left eye. There was caked blood around the hole.

IX

CINDY MARKHAM, age 23, was under police quard in a hospital; she remained in shock. Ramon Charra was laid out on a slab in the morgue; he remained dead.

Rhonda Farmer had driven a small, expensive sports car off a pier into Biscayne Bay. But she had forgot to put up the top. So she had surfaced, and bystanders had pulled her alive from the water.

She now sat in a first floor interrogation room at police headquarters, not hearing—or ignoring—cop questions. The cops hadn't figured her out yet. On the third floor, Detective Joe Lynn, Chief of Police Will Gentry, and Mike Shayne sat in Gentry's office, attempting to wrap two murders into one package.

"Charra, and the Markham kid," graveled Gentry, black cigar stub bobbing in a corner of his mouth, "was a passion thing. Probably spur of the moment, maybe fear, maybe anger, maybe jealousy, maybe a jilt. The kid'll tell us when the docs bring her around.

"The Roberts woman is another horse. I'm saying her murder was premeditated. Somebody took time to knot panty hose. Somebody entered the shower, strangled. Somebody bothered to hang her up. Goddamnit, somebody wanted her on display!"

"Maybe I shouldn't have turned Roberts free," mused Joe Lynn.

"Mike?" snapped Gentry.

Shayne tugged his ear. "The only tie I can see, Will, is Ramon Charra: Charra and Kara Roberts, Charra and Cindy Markham. Once Charra was hustling Mrs. Roberts. Last night it was the Markham girl. But that's where the tie ends. It's a time thing, dammit. Roberts told me it was around eleven o'clock when he saw his wife checking in at the motel. Rhonda Farmer says Charra didn't leave her apartment until eleven, maybe eleven-thirty."

"So it probably couldn't have been Charra at the motel."

"Roberts admits he didn't see Charra enter the motel unit. He only assumes it was Charra. But if you want to believe Rhonda Farmer, even that assumption is wrong. She says Charra and Kara Roberts were finished weeks ago. I'm inclined to believe her. I think she is a very hep dame when it comes to Ramon Charra."

"So that leaves us with what?" Lynn asked.

Shayne shrugged. "A boyfriend we don't know about. Maybe even a boyfriend Roberts hasn't discovered. It could be, easy enough. Kara Roberts was a mover. Or you can take an unknown B&E man, somebody who cracked open her door to rob, had to kill. And there's Nolting, even though he's dead. It might even have been Roberts himself. I

couldn't prove, Will, the guy didn't kill his wife, then came to me."

Joe Lynn grunted, opened a new stick of chewing gum. "More and more I like Roberts as our man." He chewed the gum.

"How'd he do during the interrogation?" Shayne asked.

Lynn looked at Shayne. "The guy's either straight as hell, Mike, or the best liar I've ever been up against. I turned him loose because I got good answers right down the line, not even one slip when I doubled back on some of the tough questions."

Shayne stood, looked at Gentry. "How about you boys hanging it on the hook for a while where Roberts is concerned? No more questions, even with Charra on a slab. Let me see if I can catch Roberts in crossfire."

"Joe?" said Gentry.

"Have your crack at him, Mike. At the moment, I'm willing to be a spectator."

"Mike," said Gentry, taking the cigar stub from his mouth, "you missed Lee Blake, the partner. Earlier you were speculating about Blake being a nondriver and the Roberts woman and a rented car. I've had Blake run through the state computers. He's one of a minority, according to Florida records, never has been issued a driver's license, isn't on record as ever being a vehicle owner."

"I've got him tucked in the back of my mind, Will," Shayne said flatly. "I just don't know enough about the guy yet, but I will by this evening. Motive seems to be the thorn right now. The guy freely admits Kara Roberts never was one of his favorite people. On the other hand, if you live twenty-six years with something you don't particularly like, what triggers you into suddenly wiping it out?"

The big redhead stood. "Right now I'm going to check out Roberts. Maybe we can eliminate him as a suspect right off. Maybe not. We'll see."

Both Gentry and Lynn agreed to Shayne's action, and the detective left. He had Roberts' address in his pocket.

Shayne discovered that Andrew Roberts, like his partner, lived in a quiet neat neighborhood where the yards were green and the homes had required substantial investment. But he did not find Roberts.

He stood for a long time on the shaded slab porch with a thumb held against a button. Finally he scowled and turned to survey the area. He had expected to find Roberts sleeping, but to get no answer to his summons triggered little buzzes inside his head. He walked around the house, wary, cautious, looked at windows, found a small patio and swimming pool in the backyard. A

small poodle in a yard next door barked at him through a fence.

A woman, drawn by the barking, appeared to quiet the dog. Shayne called out: "Hi. Do you happen to know if Mr. Roberts is at home?"

"No. . .no, I don't," the woman replied. Her voice broke. She seemed nervous, hesitant. Then she bit her lower lip and managed, "Are you a detective?"

"Yes."

"Oh, well, I thought. . .I mean I heard on the radio. . ." She let the words rattle off, then exploded suddenly. "What an awful thing to happen!"

"Is your name Hale?" Shayne wanted to know.

"Hale? No. Morgan. Fran Morgan. The Hales live down the street. Three houses, this side. Yes. . .yes, I imagine you might want to talk to them. The Hales and the Roberts are. . .were good friends."

"Were?"

The woman seemed to gather herself. "I really don't know anything about their relationship. I shouldn't be saying anything. I mean. . .well, I live next door here, sure, but I really don't know much about the Robertses. . .their friends. My husband and I are separated, you see. Not divorced, just separated. But the point is, I live here alone. . .that is, there's no man here and—"

"I've got it, Mrs. Morgan," Shayne said.

"You have?" She looked surprised.

"Kara Roberts and men. We know about that."

"Oh."

Shayne left her standing in the yard and frowning. He walked quickly to the Hale house. The woman who opened the door said she was Nancy Hale.

She was short, small, but there were years, perhaps forty-five. The last ten years were displayed in crowsfeet at the corners of eyes and lips, in a slight protrusion of stomach, a hint of extra thickness beginning to build in neck and ankles, streaks of gray in what once probably had been glossy black hair.

Shayne explained his presence and got the impression that nervousness was a contagious disease in the neighborhood on this day. Nancy Hale's eyes darted and flicked, would not remain still.

She moved around. And she said she could not, would not, answer questions about Andrew and Kara Roberts without the presence of her husband who was at the automobile agency he owned. Her husband would be home around six or seven o'clock in the evening. "Mr. Shayne, could you return then?" she finished.

Mike Shayne departed. He was

disturbed. Why was everyone so nervous? Because murder had been committed, someone from the neighborhood had been killed in a violent act?

Or did it run deeper? Especially with Nancy Hale. Nancy Hale had acted as if she were walking on frayed nerve ends. The Patrick Hale-Kara Roberts thing had been through long ago. Or had it?

Shayne got into the convertible, sat for several seconds in contemplation, then stirred as a shiny station wagon was backed out of a driveway down the street. The station wagon bounced, then shot forward, weaved slightly in the fast takeoff, moving away from him. Shayne trailed the wagon. Nancy Hale was certainly an erratic driver.

She finally curled in to a Holiday Inn, inched down a long drive in front of colorful double decked units. It was as if Nancy Hale was seeking something. The wagon disappeared around a corner.

Shayne fed gas to the convertible, then whipped suddenly into a parking slot. Nancy Hale was out of the wagon halfway back toward the street and knocking on a ground floor unit door. The door opened and she disappeared.

Shayne debated, then stomped to the unit and used heavy knuckles on the door. It was

jerked open almost immediately. The redhead grunted on Andrew Roberts.

X

ROBERTS backed up. He looked startled. Behind him, sitting on the edge of a bed, her face mirroring fear, was Nancy Hale.

"Okay," Shayne growled, "time to level with father."

Roberts and Nancy Hale were on the panic button. They talked, and plenty. Up until the early morning hours, when Roberts had been questioned by Shayne, by the police, Roberts had been convinced his wife's lover-killer was Ramon Charra.

Shayne and the police, but especially Shayne, had cracked that conviction with persistent speculations that the lover-killer could be someone else. Roberts had been forced to mentally turn to other possible candidates. And he had turned immediately to past lovers.

Patrick Hale had loomed big in his thinking. After leaving the police, Roberts had taken the motel unit for seclusion. He had wanted to be alone, uninterrupted in his thinking.

Finally he had telephoned Nancy Hale, inquired about her husband's whereabouts the previous night, had been told Patrick Hale had been gone from the nest most of the night, had returned home around four o'clock in the morning. Nancy Hale did not know where her husband had spent the night.

Shayne looked at her. She shook her head. "I still. . .don't know," she said in a voice just above a whisper.

"Do you think your husband is capable of killing?"

Nancy Hale hung her head, remained silent.

"Okay, so I'll ask him," said Shayne. He looked at Roberts. "Any special reason for making Hale Number One on your list?"

Roberts seemed to debate with himself, the blueberry eyes clouded, then he said, "It was the car. I know. . .you said it was a rental car, but it could have been. . .well, Patrick, could take almost any car from his agency."

"Uh-huh," Shayne agreed and asked, "You hear about Charra?"

Roberts nodded. "It was on the radio, just before you arrived."

"You understand, don't you, he still could have been your wife's killer? He could have killed, gone to the Markham girl, then been killed himself. Are you sure about the hour your wife arrived at the motel? I believe you said it was around eleven o'clock."

"It was a few minutes after eleven. I don't remember how many minutes, perhaps five, six, seven, right in that area. I looked at my watch. I don't know why, but I did."

Shayne frowned, remained silent for a few seconds. Then he shot a glance between Roberts and Nancy Hale. He suddenly asked Roberts, "You two got anything going between you?"

Nancy Hale gasped, Roberts looked surprised.

"Your husband, Mrs. Hale, and your wife, Roberts. Why not you two?"

"No," Roberts said in a very soft voice. "Nancy and I are friends, no more. We have had a mutual. . .worry, problem."

"Okay. Where's this car agency, Mrs. Hale?"

But it was Roberts who gave the address. Nancy Hale was crying. Shayne left them that way.

He was finally allowed access to Patrick Hale who was alone in a spacious office stuffed in a nook away from the clatter of automobile business. The detective was ushered into the office by a young, leggy blonde girl in a short skirt and a taut blouse.

Hale was a large, nattily-attired man, powdery and puffy, with sparkling rings on fat fingers. He stood behind a huge black desk. There was fatigue and apprehension in his tiny eyes. He didn't bother to offer a hand. Rather, he waved vaguely toward a black leather chair in front of the desk.

"I debated," he said flatly, "about talking to you, Mr. Shayne. You are not a policeman. But you were blunt about why you are here, so I will be blunt with you and perhaps we can end your visit quickly."

Hale sat behind the desk, reached down into a hidden wastebasket, came up with a folded newspaper. He flipped the newspaper to the detective. The paper had been folded to display the story of the murder of Kara Roberts.

There was a photograph captioned 'The Death Chamber,' and the photographer had got a lot of mileage out of no more than the room. He had included a part of the dresser and mirror, a portion of the lumpy double bed, the dumped purse, the scattered clothing, one of the holes in the carpeting. He had had very little to picture, but he had managed to bring out the stark shabbiness vividly.

"I knew her," Hale said, remaining blunt. "Take it from there."

"Did you kill her?" Shayne echoed the man s bluntness.

In answer, Hale touched a button at the edge of the black desk. Shayne waited. The door behind him opened. The leggy blonde entered, stopped two steps inside the office, looked straight at Patrick Hale, head cocked slightly as she waited.

"Where was I last night, Miss Landers?" Hale asked.

The blonde's eyes flicked before she said, "At the party. At my place. You got there around nine."

"Be specific," Hale snapped

"Around nine and that s as specific as I can be Mr Hale You stayed until almost three-thirty this morning "

"Between my arrival and my departure did I leave the apartment at any time?"

"No." She smiled. "I was with you all the time And so were six other people. It was a groove!"

"All right Miss Landers," Hale said. "You can save your enthusiasm for our next party That will be all for now."

The blonde departed and Hale smiled. Shayne stood as Hale

smirked. "I can give you six names, Mr. Shayne, if you wish to check. One or two of these people might be difficult to turn up while the sun is shinning, but then you private detectives expect to waste shoe leather, don't you?"

It took Shayne only three minutes to get back to his car. He drove to R and B Printing. He had trouble putting Patrick Hale out of his mind: some things leave a sour taste even after discarding.

But Hale could be discarded. He was covered for Tuesday night. Hale was a sure-thing man—as were so many automobile dealers.

Lee Blake had seen the newspaper too, he told Shayne when the redhead showed it to him. "Man," he said, shaking his head, "it's all there. The story, the picture. Nothing derogatory about Kara actually said, but the implications, Shayne, smack you down. That photographer is an expert. He got it all: the dirty walls, the cracked mirror, the bed, the carpeting with a hole in it. Man, what that must conjure in the minds of a reader."

Blake hesitated, frowned. "It's not good for business, either. We could lose some business over this. Incidently, where the hell is Andy? Have you seen him today? I've tried calling the house."

"He's hiding out in a motel," said Shayne. "The business, Blake: is it as good in reality as it shows on paper?"

"Huh?"

"Your books," pressed the detective. "How do the entries stack with bank accounts?"

"Well, hell, how would I know? Kara is. . .was the bookkeeper—hey, wait a minute! What are you trying to say?"

"Yeah," said Shayne, "an audit might be in line. It could explain some things. If Kara Roberts has been stealing from the firm, altering the books for years, if her husband finally discovered her, if he took dealing with her in his own hands and—"

"Wild!" Blake broke in shaking his head. "I'd say that was impossible."

"It is? Okay, you might ponder the possibility that your partner and his wife haven't been giving you an even break all of these years."

"Come on, Shayne!"

"She kept the books, Blake. Maybe Roberts and his wife were cutting themselves in for seventy-five per cent against twenty-five for you. How do you know? Maybe that's how Kara has been able to have her lovers—and kept a husband. Maybe she had Roberts hanging high. Maybe he finally tired of it, maybe something happened between them, maybe—"

Shayne left the thought dan-

gling, and left the printer standing bemused, in apparent shock at the ideas Shayne had advanced.

XI

THE DETECTIVE went next to his apartment, kicked his rolled newspaper inside as he entered. He needed solitude, for thinking, for gathering dangling threads. He called Lucy Hamilton, but her lunch date with the young attorney Donald Kelly had not materialized. Kelly had called, asked for a raincheck; Mason Duncan had Kelly on the go.

Shayne put the phone together, stood scowling for a moment. Now he'd have to get an appointment with Duncan, discuss the man's thinking about Roberts.

He called Will Gentry and Gentry had some news from Peter Painter-land in Miami Beach. The hit-and-run driver who had struck down Nolting had walked in to police headquarters. He was a young guy, scared as hell, no connection with Nolting or the Roberts case.

Shayne tried out his new thinking about Andrew and Kara Roberts and the books at R and B Printing on the police chief. Gentry grunted and said nothing for a long time. Finally he growled, "Okay, Mike, it's another angle."

"Uh-huh," Shayne graveled. "But, unfortunately, no more."

"Have you braced Roberts with your thinking?"

"No."

"Don't. Let's not make the guy any more jumpy than he is. I don't want to have to chase him across country."

"Will, the guy bugs me. He's not conventional. He either killed and purposely involved himself by coming to me or he's a flounderer. If the former, he's a sharpie; he's got an open door somewhere down the line. If the latter, he's got himself mired so deep he's confusing everybody. And that sure as hell includes me! I wish to hell I could figure the guy."

"Are you trying to tell me, Mike," Gentry said, "the guy won't bolt?"

"I think I'm trying to tell you, Will, I need some sleep."

What passed for a laugh came out of Gentry suddenly. He said, "To put your mind at ease, friend, we've got Roberts under wraps. Lynn has had a man on him since he left the station this morning."

Shayne grunted, then grinned as he dropped the receiver into its cradle. Lack of sleep had boggled his mind. Cops never gave a potential suspect free rein. Not as long as a case remained in the unsolved file.

Shayne showered, shaved, donned fresh shorts, found the

rolled newspaper on the floor and then sat loosely in the deep chair in his front room, sipping a cognac and ice water without opening the paper.

Opposite him, through an open door, the bed beckoned. His grin was crooked as he stared at the bed. A little masochist in him came out. He taunted his mind and his body with the thought of deep sleep.

His door buzzer sounded. He jerked against the sound started to get up, then slumped again. He'd pretend he wasn't home. The door buzzer sounded off again.

Shayne scowled, but didn't move.

Someone kicked the door. Several times, down low. Shayne went to the door, yanked it open, and stared at a bobbing Patrick Hale.

Hale was bombed. He stood weaving, still natty, still puffy. But now his fleshy face was flushed and his eyes were narrow gleams of brightness as he got Shayne in focus.

"Ahhh. Shayne!"

And then he launched a looping fist. Shayne watched it come. He breathed twice before it got to him. He grabbed the thick wrist behind the fist, twisted his large body and spun Hale across the front room.

Surprisingly, the fat man missed everything in the room. He stumbled on through the open door into the bedroom and went face down on the bed. Shayne clamped huge hands on the back of the slick-looking suitcoat and yanked Hale to his feet.

Hale gasped, slurring the words: "I got to thinkin'. I don't like nobody who comes 'round accusing me of murder!"

He shot an elbow back into Shayne's middle. It was like getting hit with a marshmallow. Shayne spun the heavy man, shoved him across the room. Hale hit the front of the dresser. His head flopped back and rammed the mirror. The glass splintered.

Shayne groaned an oath, caught Hale again and waltzed him out of the bedroom, across the front room and out of the apartment. He took him down the hall, put him in the elevator, then lifted his hands high and slammed the solid edges down against Hale's neck muscles.

Hale went down to the floor of the elevator with a sigh. Shayne propped him against a wall, punched the Down button and stepped outside. The elevator doors went together with a whisper behind him as he stomped back to his apartment. He slammed the door and marched into the bedroom, stood breathing hard as he stared on the cracks in the mirror glass.

He jerked abruptly, ripped his eyes away from the mirror, then

looked again. His mind clicked, his thoughts meshed. Abruptly, he was mentally as taut as a bow string as pieces of the murder puzzle clunked into place. He didn't have all the pieces to complete the puzzle. Not yet. But he was moving. By God, at last, he was moving!

Shayne dressed quickly, put on the gun rig, jammed on his hat. He stopped in the front room, yanked open the rolled newspaper, turned to the story of Kara Roberts' murder. He grunted satisfaction. Yeah, it wasn't there.

He cheated on speed limits and gas rationing as he drove to the quiet residential neighborhood where he braked at a curbing and stared hard at a shadowed house. No light showing from the inside.

He cursed softly and swung the convertible into the driveway to turn around. The bright headlights picked up the garage doors. No windows, he remembered and jammed a foot against the brake pedal. Then he closed down the convertible and marched to the front door of the house and stuck a thumb against the button. Some things were handled better headon.

But he did not get an answer to his summons.

Shayne scowled, went to what once had been garage doors. He could not find light seepage, but that was not surprising. He put an ear against the door. The rhythmic sound was faint. More than noise, it was a vibration against his eardrum.

He went on around to the rear of the house, found the patio, examined windows and the sliding glass door. All were locked. He picked a small window, took off his shoe and knocked out a part of the glass. Reaching inside, he found the lock, opened the window. Then Shayne squeezed his large body into the house.

The rhythmic sound definitely was noise now. He went to the door that he knew opened into what once had been a garage and opened it. Lee Blake, his back to Shayne, was standing at the small job press, feeding it. Shayne saw the stacked bills to Blake's left and grunted.

As if by premonition Blake whirled, stared at the detective, reached out reflexively and shut off the press. His cheeks suddenly were hollow, jaw muscles twitching, eyes bright but filled with confusion.

"Printing a little going-away money?" Shayne asked in a voice that grated.

He figured Blake might attempt to bolt. Blake was a fitness advocate, probably considered himself in condition to handle any physical determent.

But Blake surprised the redhead. He stared for a few more seconds, then slumped. "Where

did I botch it up, Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne said, "This afternoon, at your plant, you marveled at the expertise of the newspaper photographer. And you said he got it all, including the cracked mirror. The only trouble, Blake, is the newspaper photograph does not show a cracked mirror. So you knew the mirror was cracked because you were there, you were in the unit at Nolting's motel. How long were you and Kara Roberts lovers?"

"We never were lovers. I wouldn't lower myself."

"But somehow she had you."

"She had me," he said. Then he seemed to reflect. "A careless night," he said finally. He seemed almost to smile.

"She was a witch, you know that. Men. Any man. She lived on men. But I wouldn't fall into the fold It galled her She kept trying And she came here one night, I suppose to try to seduce me. I'd been careless, hadn't checked the front door lock. I was back here, printing, and then suddenly she was with me and laughing on what she saw. She had me."

"She cut herself in."

Blake grimaced. "Greed made her tick, Shayne. Men and money. . ." He let the words trail off as he shook his head.

Shayne scowled, tugged his ear in thought. "Good money plates are hard to come by, Blake."

Blake looked up, seemed almost to smile. "I met a guy in New York a long time ago. With offset, you don't need good plates. Just a good photographer and a little expertise. He showed me the possibilities. I worked out the rest."

"And he buys your product? Good green for phoney."

"Uh-huh," Blake nodded.

"Who is he?" Shayne asked.

Blake shook his head. "You think I'm ready for suicide?"

Shayne was willing to give Will Gentry a mystery man in New York. He said, "Okay, Blake, Kara Roberts finds you out, cuts herself in, and then you finally decided to get the weight off your back."

"I should have done it years ago." Blake's face darkened.

"No sweat luring her, I guess."

"I'm male, Shayne, and I was a male who had held out. She had a little ego thing about her, too All I had to do was make myself available. She had the experience in clandestine rendezvousing."

"Still, you had to get her out to the motel. I assume you didn't want to kill her here. That would have left a problem of body disposal."

Blake lifted his hands in a slight gesture. "She was a perfect woman to murder, Shayne. Man-hungry, greedy, with a peculiar yen for subterfuge and

shoddy motel rooms. She made killing her easy. So easy I almost forgot to add the trimmings: taking her rings, cleaning out her purse. I figured an extra curve for the police couldn't hurt."

"Hanging her from a shower nozzle was another trimming?"

Blake frowned deeply, found something on the floor interesting. It was a long time before he said, "I had to see her ugly, Shayne. Just once. I had to see. . ."

He clamped the white teeth against the whisper-soft voice and gritted.

"Okay, pal, let's close up shop and hustle on downtown to see Gentry."

Blake looked up, lifted an eyebrow. "Who's he?"

"The chief of police."

"Oh." Blake stared at Shayne for several seconds, then shrugged. "Why not? If I did escape, I'd spend the rest of my life looking behind me."

Blake made his bid at the front door. He stomped hard on the top of Shayne's foot, smashed an elbow into the redhead's middle, twisted into Shayne, sent the detective's hat flying, and grabbed a fistful of red hair. He yanked Shayne's head down and brought his knee up toward Shayne's mug.

Shayne shot one fist into Blake's groin and the other into his belly. Blake doubled. Shayne snapped his long body erect, smashing the back of his head against Blake's jaw. Blake peeled off, stumbled backward, slammed into a wall and sat. Shayne looped a vicious uppercut, then stilled it in flight. Blake wasn't unconscious. But he sat glassy-eyed and still.

Finally Blake managed, "Y-you. . .were ready."

"Always, pal," Mike Shayne snarled. "And especially for a guy who has been filling safety deposit boxes through the years. That kind of guy can afford a corner of the world where he might not have to look over his shoulder!"

In the Next Issue—

THE GODMOTHER

by BANNISTER WILLIAMS

Mama Mafia, Boss of The Family! She ruled her roost with an iron will. To cross her was worth your life, especially if you were her favorite nephew and rich.

Meyer Lansky, Tony Accardo, Lucky Luciano—they all jumped when he said jump, and killed when he said kill. Murderously tough and viciously cruel, he ran every racket in New York. From the small time gambler to the highest echelons of Murder, Incorporated, everyone knew and feared the man whom the ladies called Joe Adonis and the men called Capo di Capo—The Boss of Bosses:

THE EMINENT MR. ADONIS CORRUPTOR, GANGSTER, KILLER

by DAVID MAZROFF

THE UNDERWORLD has known many men with brains. They possessed the kind of intelligence that would have made them successful in any legitimate business without the air of illegal or lawless activities.

They were organizers, sharp operators, geniuses in the field of money equal to that of any Wall Street tycoon. They were also hoodlums, racketeers, gangsters, musclemen, shakedown artists, and some of them were killers.

The names come to mind. Al Capone, Meyer Lansky, Johnny Torrio, Murray "The Camel" Humphreys, Charles "Lucky" Luciano, Frank Costello, Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, Tony Accardo, Arnold Rothstein, and a few others like them.

There was also Joe Doto, alias Joe Adonis, or, as most often referred to by the Brothers of the Blunderworld—Joey A. Like Lansky, Humphreys, and Costello, Joey A. was not a killer in the sense that he personally executed rivals or those who crossed him. Like Torrio, he ordered killings. How many is unknown. Any guess would be good: ten, fifteen, twenty, or higher.

A case in point concerns Sam Bloom of Chicago. Bloom had all the connections in Nassau for booze and used fast speed boats to haul the stuff to coastal cities and then by truck to New York, Cleveland, and Chicago, the main points of distribution.

When Prohibition came in, Irving Wexler, alias Waxy Gordon, was the first big-time hood to get into the business of illict liquor. In due time, the old line Sicilian Mafioso got into illicit booze, rum-running as well as the home-made stuff produced in warehouses, and sold as imported liquor "right off the boat."

The 'Mustache Petes', as the old line Sicilians were referred to, included Salvatore Maranzano, Giuseppe "Joe The Boss" Masseria, and Ignazio "Lupo The Wolf" Lupo.

Joe Adonis became a partner of Longy Zwillman who operated out of New Jersey. Zwillman had close ties with Lepke Buchalter and Jake Shapiro of Murder, Inc., and through them, was taken into the fast rising clique headed by Lucky Luciano. Joe Adonis, naturally, also then was accepted.

Sam Bloom had the backing of Lansky and Siegel, for a time. When those two backed away all bets were off on Bloom and the mob moved in. Bloom immediately ran into all sorts of problems. His trucks were heisted, even those consigned to the New York mob. He argued that he was entitled to full payment for his liquor because the mob had promised him protection.

Bloom yelled loud and long and warned that unless he was paid off in full he would take matter to Capone and then—"All hell is going to break loose! So you guys come up with my money or else!" Dangerous words.

Luciano said, "Sam, we're sending Joey Adonis with you to protect this money. Here is a hundred grand." He counted out the money and handed it to Adonis. "Joey, take along a couple of the boys with you, just in case."

"When do I get the rest of the money?" Bloom asked.

"In a week or two."

Bloom was mollified. It didn't matter. He never reached his apartment at 307 West Seventy-fifth Street, and was never seen again.

Giuseppe Antonio Doto, according to the records, all of them hazy, was born in Montemarano, Italy, on November 22, 1902, to Maria and Michele Doto. The names, in the interest of Americanization, were changed to Michel and Mary Doto, and later, Giuseppe was changed to Joe.

Michele Doto arrived in the United States in 1906, and set-

tled in New York City in the Italian section of the Lower East Side ghetto. Three years later, in 1909, he sent for his wife and four sons.

Joe Doto's formal education, like that of Siegel, Luciano, Anastasia, and most of the others who were in the mobs, was sketchy. However, what he lacked in academic learning he made up for in innate intelligence. With it he as possessed of extremely good looks. Dark hair and eyes, a smooth complexion, above average height with an athletic figure.

In short, a ladies' man.

His courtly manners attracted chorus girls, principals in shows, and ladies in all walks of life. He had one advantage over Bugsy Siegel who was as handsome as any movie star. Doto never lost his temper.

By the middle twenties he was the leader of his own gang known as The Broadway Mob. The mob was engaged in diverse illegal shenanigans from burglary to robbery to shakedowns and bootlegging along with a few other mischievous extracurricular activities.

Gambling was one of those. The mob's range of operations was wide. Doto thus came to the attention of the boys in the Syndicate. His gambling and bookmaking activities brought him to the attention of Frank Costello

ALBERT ANASTASIA

and Frank Erickson, and also Arnold Rothstein.

This trio handled millions of dollars in layoff bets. Bookmakers who couldn't carry huge amounts of money on any one horse in a race bet off what they couldn't handle with Costello and Erickson who were partners. Costello sent for Doto. A message from Costello at the time was like a command to appear before a king.

"Joe," Costello said, "I've got the word that you're handling a lot of money in horse bets and baseball. Correct?"

"Yes, sir, that's right."

"Well, I just wanted you to

know that if you get any wagers you can't carry you can bring them to me or Erickson. We'll give you the usual fifteen per cent if we win on the bet. In that case you take no risk and continue your image as a bookmaker able to handle sizable bets. How does that strike you?"

"That's okay. I like it."

"There's one more thing. We have some influence with certain police and public officials. We'll see to it that you aren't bothered. In gambling, that is. Anything else, you're on your own."

"I understand."

"If you should get into difficulty on other matters, my friend Arnold Rothstein will be able to help you. However, his fees are high. It's worth it to stay out of jail."

"Sure. I'll go along with that."

"That's fine. You can reach me at this number." He handed Doto a card. "If I'm not there someone will take the message and get in touch with me."

"Thanks, Mr. Costello. I appreciate it."

"Not at all."

THE NEXT DAY, Doto received a call at his apartment from Abner "Longie" Zwillman. Mincing no words, Zwillman told Doto to meet him at the Astor bar. Although Doto made a point of his own independance, he agreed to the meeting.

Doto found Zwillman waiting for him in the cocktail lounge. He went to the table and sat down. "You know me, eh?" Zwillman said.

"Yep. I've seen you with some people from time to time, in a few places in town."

"Now then, Mr. Doto—Joe, isn't it?"

"My friends call me that."

"I'll call you Joe because I just may turn out to be your friend. If not, I'll call you a lot of names you won't like."

"I'm listening."

"Listen good. A truck load of my booze was heisted two days ago right after it came out of the Holland Tunnel. Your boys heisted the truck. I got the word straight. I don't have to tell you I got connections in this town. I can tell you everything that goes on in every borough of the city. When I say something it's backed by information. The most solid kind of information. I said your boys heisted my truck of booze."

"Okay, my boys heisted your truck of booze. Now what?"

"You dropped it off to somebody."

"I thought you knew everything that goes on in this town."

Zwillman scowled. "I do. You sold the load to a bootlegger. I know that, too. What I don't know is what bootlegger. I can't keep track of every lousy bootlegger operating independently.

I'm giving you a deal. You got the money for the load. You keep it. What I want to know is the name of the bootlegger. He bought a hot load of goods. My goods. I'll get the booze back or the dough for it."

"I'm not a fink, Zwillman."

"Who says you are? Now, listen to me, Joe. You're going up. The right people like you. You can get to be a big man if you go along with the right people. Now, you go ahead and call Luciano. He'll tell you which way to go. You got his number?"

"Luciano or nobody else can make me fink."

"Why don't you just call him?"

"Okay. I will." He went to a booth in the lobby and dialed Luciano's private number. "Charlie, this is Joe Doto. Zwillman is in the bar in the Astor. I—"

Luciano cut him off. "Joe, do like he says. He cleared this with me. He's good people. The guy you sold that stuff to is not with us. You owe him nothing. Give Zwillman the information he wants."

"You're asking a lot, Charlie."

"No, Joe. This is for your good. We need Zwillman. He's got Jersey in the bag. You can do yourself a lot of good with him. You do what he says and then come up here. We'll have a little talk that will help you in many ways."

Doto was silent a long time and finally agreed. He went back to where Zwillman sat. "Okay, Longie, I'll go along."

"You're doing the smart thing, Joe. Now, I got a proposition for you. I need someone like you in Jersey. You be my righthand man. In time you will be a full partner. For now, I'll cut you in for twenty percent of everything."

"How much minimum?"

"Tell me how much you net a week, every week, or the average for the year."

"About a grand or fifteen hundred a week."

"I'll make two grand a week a contingency if we can work together. Let's try it out for a month."

"Sounds okay. What do I do with my boys? I can't just drop them. I wouldn't do that."

"How many you got?"

"Ten. And they're all good. Each one is an expert at what he does. I drop them and somebody takes them over and then I've got ten guys gunning for me. That's one side of it. The other side is that they've stuck with me and so I've got to stick with them."

"I agree. We'll take them along. There'll be a lot of work they can do. Satisfied?"

"Sure, but suppose I had refused?"

"If you refused this kind of proposition you would have to be stupid, and that you ain't. I fig-

ured you right." Zwillman took a card from a wallet and handed it to Doto "Meet me there tomorrow At noon. You'll meet all the boys."

IT WASN'T A simple task for Doto to make the move to Jersey. He had too many irons in the fire. Besides, he wanted all the contacts he had made in Manhattan, especially with Frank Costello. He decided to leave his organization intact right where it was. Accordingly, he called a meeting of his men and informed them of a slight change in the general operations. He leveled with them because he felt he could trust each one completely.

"I've got a deal with Longie Zwillman in Jersey. He controls all of Bergen County. I'll be spending a lot of time there. However, I will keep in close touch with our operations here. I'll tell you this much, any deals that come up in Jersey you'll all get your end. For the time, Jimmy Thomas will run things subject to my orders. Are there any objections or suggestions?"

No one had any.

Things weren't all roses and honey in Jersey for Zwillman. Willie and Solly Moretti were as firmly entrenched there as was Zwillman.

The wily hood knew that in a showdown with the Moretti brothers he would have to come out second best. At that time Louis "Lepke" Buchalter and Jake "Gurrah" Shapiro had not yet reached the importance in crime circles they eventually attained. Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lanski were still small time in their operations and had not joined with the Mafia. That left Longy Zwillman pretty much out on a limb so far as influence in the Mafia was concerned. What he needed was an Italian or Sicilian partner. He chose Joe Doto.

Actually, he didn't care if Doto gave him the name of the bootlegger to whom he sold the booze or not. That was only by way of introduction. He knew that Doto was highly regarded by Luciano and Costello. That was the clout he needed. With Doto as his lieutenant, things began to look brighter for Zwillman.

Willie and Solly Moretti were hoods in every sense of the word. Hard-nosed, tough, asking no quarter and giving none. Willie Moretti was something of a paradox. He was a slick corruptor of police and politicians. He was a killer. And sometimes he talked a little too much. He liked to brag about what a big shot he was.

Willi Moretti was born in the very heart of East Harlem. He was eight years Joe Doto's senior. Moretti grew up in the section now known as Spanish Harlem, the section running from 106th

Street and Broadway to 119th Street and Central Park West. It was the preserve of Lupo The Wolf and his gang of narcotics peddlers, thieves, robbers and murderers. He was short, only five feet four, but stockily built. He was more than the typical street urchin because he was a little tougher and little smarter, a wise guy really, in the sense that the phrase is used.

In the atmosphere of the then Italian ghetto and beyond it, in what is now Harlem and its total Negro population, were Jews who wanted to escape the Lower East Side ghetto. Willie and Solly Moretti were package thieves, burglars, robbers. Willie Moretti killed a hackie named Bill Brady for no other reason than the fact that he was suspected of being a police informer. There were other killings before and after.

Joe Doto knew when he moved in with Zwillman that things wouldn't be smooth. They never were. One man couldn't run a town by himself. Zwillman had connections, true. So did Moretti. Doto ran into Willie and Solly Moretti a week after he joined up with Zwillman.

They met in Duke's restaurant at 783 Palisades Avenue, a hangout for every hood and gangster in Cliffside Park and its surrounding towns.

"How come you joined up with Zwillman?" Willie Moretti asked. "He's a Jew. Why not with us? We're Italians. Like you."

"You didn't ask me."

"Okay, we're asking you now."

"You're a little late. I don't bounce around like a tennis ball. I gave Zwillman my word. That's it."

"Zwillman ain't gonna last," Willie Moretti said. "This is our territory. We got all the protection. You're smart, you'll move over with us."

"That's right," Solly Moretti said. "This is where you belong."

"I'm smart," Doto replied, "so I'm sticking with Zwillman. One more thing, don't push me and I won't push you."

Willie Moretti looked pained. "Push you? Joey, we want to help you. That's why we're talking to you." He turned to his brother and nudged him. "Solly, tell him the score."

Solly said, "Joey, this ain't New York. It's a small town. We've got the cops and everybody else in our pocket. That's protection. You ain't with us you're liable to get picked up for things you ain't never heard of, see."

"I'll take my chances." Doto got up from the table, jabbed finger toward Willie Moretti. "I'll repeat it. Don't push me!" He turned and walked out. He got in touch with Lucky Luciano when he reached his apartment in Manhattan, told him what had

transpired with the Morettis.

"I don't like that guy pushing me, Charlie. You straighten him out or I will." There was no mistaking the deadly menace in his tone despite its evenness.

Luciano spoke placatingly. He was a man who never lost his cool under any and all circumstances. "Joe, you are going to have to learn to play everything to your advantage. When you lose your temper you give the other guy the best of it. You're a comer and Moretti would like to have you with him, no doubt. Willie often talks a lot before he thinks. He feels that everything should belong to the Italians and the Sicilians. It can't work that way. Siegel and Lansky are Jewish. So are Buchalter and Shapiro. So is Zwillman. I've got a very clever young man named Stuart Kaplan working for me. He's the sharpest accountant in New York. There's going to be heat.

"I don't want the papers pouring it all on the Italians and Sicilians. That would be bad. Owney Madden is Irish. He's got a lot of Irishmen in his organization. So, there are Italians, Sicilians, Jewish, Irish, and a few other different nationalities in action. That's the way it should be. Moretti doesn't understand that. I'll have a talk with him. I want you two to get along. You'll do it?"

Doto thought about it for a while. "Okay, Charlie. I see your point. It makes sense."

"Good boy. Keep in touch. I'm always here."

Later that day, Doto got in touch with Zwillman and told him what had happened. Zwillman shrugged the whole thing off.

"Joey, you're a pretty sharp young guy but there are a few things you have to learn about organization operation. First of all, there was really no beef between you and Moretti. That little sawed-off Napoleon is a lotta mouth. He was testing you to see how far your loyalty went. If you had said you wanted to switch over he wouldn't have taken you anyway.

"Why? I'll tell you. If you were willing to switch to him from me then you would do the same if somebody else made you a better offer. He knows now that you won't. He won't try again. Next, don't call Luciano every time you've got a minor beef. You're supposed to be able to straighten that out by yourself. A serious beef, of course, would go before the Council. Understand?"

IT WAS AN important lesson, one Doto never forgot. In the next year he made several significant moves in Bergen County. They established what was termed as an unprecedented capital of crime ever to flourish in

America, outrivaling Chicago in its heyday during the Twenties. Adonis brought in Albert Anastasia, Vito Genovese, Bugsy Siegel, and many members of their mobs, and took over the territory beyond the western borders of the George Washington Bridge.

What came next was the corruption of cops and politicians. Doto thus literally ran the police department. Gambling joints, bookie joints, policy and numbers, and every other gambling dodge ran wide open. Hijackings of trucks laden with merchandise picked up at the Manhattan and Jersey docks were frequent. This merchandise disappeared into warehouses and later were transfered to stores operated by Adonis.

JOE MASSERIA

It was crime on a massive scale and so extraordinarily outrageous as to defy belief. Not one man ever was tried for these hijackings. Drivers of the trucks developed the worst kind of recollection as to the description and the identity of the robbers.

Doto chose an apartment building near the George Washington Bridge as his headquarters and there came the top hoods and gangsters from all over the country for summit meetings to discuss alliances. Here, too, was discussed and formulated the international drug traffic. The mob leaders from California to New York voted a compact that joined them into a multi-million dollar conspiracy to import heroin and develop it into a world-wide smuggling and drug pushing operation.

Joe Doto and Lucky Luciano were the architects, and here Joe Doto emerged as one of the most important men in the criminal hierarchy. The heterogenic group of mobsters, Italian, Sicilian, Jewish, Irish, Spanish and French paid him homage for his astuteness.

The plan Doto fostered was to send a man into Indo-China, into the Golden Triangle area, there to buy up raw opium.

"Raw opium," Doto told the group, "can be bought for about $35 a *chois*. That's the hill country unit of weight and bulk for raw opium. It is about three pounds six ounces in avoirdupois weight. It can be cooked down into morphine and then heroin by the hill people. We will pay them a nominal price, a little higher than what the usual Chinese middlemen pay them. We'll have to deal with one of those middlemen. Most of them are as corrupt as a two-buck whore."

There were smiles around the room.

A hood from Kansas City said, "Can you blame a two-buck whore for being corrupt, Joe?" This brought laughter.

Doto went on. "The big problem then would be to smuggle the stuff through Thailand's borders, and then through the check points into one of the choke-point cities such as Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, Manila, Kuala Lampur or perhaps into a small coastal port. From there into San Francisco or Mexico, and then into a central distribution point.

"That will be here. The amount each of you will get will be prorated based on your investment less expenses. You will be given a tally sheet of expenses. That will include traveling, payoffs, and cost of raw material plus refining. That's it."

Jack Dragna, who was based in Los Angeles and controlled most of California, said, "Who will check the outlay of expenses and cost?"

Luciano said, "I will." He said it in the tone of a challenge. "Are there any objections?"

No one raised an objection.

Luciano said, "I want to introduce a very important young man in our organization. Stuart Kaplan. He's an accountant. One of the best. He will assume responsibility for all the records in this operation and submit cost sheets to each of you."

Bugsy Siegel said, "Yeah, and he better be right." He laughed. "No offense, Kaplan."

Kaplan said, "I'm sure you will find all the figures accurate, as they are given to me for posting and totalizing."

Doto said, "We are asking for fifty thousand dollars from each of you, as an initial investment. We'd like the cash now or as soon as you can arrange to have it delivered. I suggest that you get in touch with your people and have them bring in the money before you leave. I have arranged for apartments here for all of you.

"Charlie, Longie and I have arranged for some entertainment for you while you are here and I'm sure you will have a good time. There is booze and champagne in every apartment. For food, you are on your own. I sug-

gest that when you go out for your meals that you don't go in large groups. We've got the town locked up but there's no use pushing it. You will turn your cash over to Kaplan and he will record it accordingly."

"Do we get a receipt?" Siegel asked, and smiled.

"Yeah, Ben," Luciano answered. "Kaplan's word."

The meeting broke up with everyone talking about the way Doto had lined up the operation of bringing heroin into the country in large quantities. What he left out, on Luciano's instructions, were the three contact men who were to supervise the operation from Indo-China to the various contact points and finally into the United States. Luciano felt that information was something the others were not entitled to, for many reasons.

There were many parties in the various apartments in the next three days, and the usual array of girls. One of them, a striking brunette, tall, curvaceous, with a provocative and knowing smile, with a look in her eyes that said she had an absolutely wild desire for him, attached herself to Doto.

She said, "You're Adonis come back to life. Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"I believe in a lot of things. Who's this guy Adonis?"

"Adonis was one of the handsomest young men in the world who was loved by Aphrodite for his beauty."

Doto laughed. "You're putting me on. So okay. I'm Adonis. Who are you?"

"Right now, I'm Aphrodite, the ancient Greek goddess of love and beauty."

"Love and beauty, eh? Can you prove it?"

"Wait and see. Come over here, Adonis."

Several of the men in the room overheard this conversation and began calling Doto by that name. It stuck. Thereafter he was known as Joe Adonis or Joey A.

After all the money had been delivered to Kaplan, who duly posted it in code in a book, the gang leaders dispersed, each returning to his own city. Joey A's gambling concession in New York had increased to the point where Costello felt he could take him in as a partner.

At about this time, too, Luciano decided to get rid of Joe "The Boss" Masseria and set him up for the kill. He ordered Adonis to send three of his best men out for the contract. Adonis chose Bugsy Siegel, Vito Genovese, and Albert Anastasia. They tailed Masseria day and night and finally caught up with him in a restaurant in Coney Island. The date, April 14, 1931.

At two o'clock on that afternoon, Siegel and Anastasia shot

Masseria dead and walked out of the restaurant. Luciano, who had been Masseria's lieutenant, immediately took over as boss. Accordingly, he moved Adonis up to a place in the Council. Adonis was making great strides. He was to go yet farther.

In the Lower East Side, Louis "Lepke" Buchalter and Jake "Gurrah" Shapiro were taking over many unions and causing industrial strife. They needed strong musclemen. They turned to Joe Adonis.

In a meeting with Buchalter and Shapiro, Adonis formulated a plan for the construction of a strike force made up of the toughest hoods in New York. This strike force would act as enforcers. Any firm, small or large, who refused to pay tribute, assessments for protection of goods and buildings it was called, would be visited by members of the strike force.

"You understand, Joey," Buchalter said, "that we work both sides of the street. We wear two hats. We are union and management."

"I understand."

JOE ADONIS didn't understand entirely. Buchalter, a man of average height, slim, with regular features and sad eyes who spoke softly as though he were apologizing for a minor wrong, was one of the most astute labor racketeers in the nation. He used men. Despite the innocence of his appearance he was one of the most feared men in New York by every hood. Back of Buchalter, really his alter ego, was the murderous Shapiro, a hulk of a man who killed mercilessly.

Joey Adonis was certain that Buchalter was befriending him, but in asking him to organize the gang of hoodlums to be used by him and for him he was also using Adonis. It was Buchalter's plan to issue orders to Adonis who would issue orders to whomever Adonis chose to lead the strike force and thereby leaving himself entirely in the clear.

Furthermore, it was also Buchalter's plan to act as an intermediary in stopping all sorts of vandalism by the strike force disavowing any knowledge of the reason for the attacks. In this way he would be the peacemaker instead of the troublemaker.

Adonis chose Albert Anastasia to lead the gang of hoods in the operation. It was a perfect choice. Anastasia, a big man with cold, piercing eyes and a heart that could have doubled as an iceberg, was elated. Murder and violence were his theme songs.

He recruited, among others, Pittsburgh Phil Strauss, Dasher Abbandando, Abe Reles, Bugsy Goldstein, Mendy Weiss, and Allie Tennenbaum. Weiss

strangled his victims. Pittsburgh Phil used an ice-pick. The Dasher and Abe Reles used hammers and hatchets. Goldstein and Tennenbaum poured gasoline over their victims and burned them to death, or shot them and buried them in lime pits.

This unholy group was to become infamous as the prime cutthroats of Murder Inc.

Weiss, an immense, lumpish, snarling murderer took over one troop. Pittsburgh Phil took over another, and Abe Reles the third troop. All of them, however, were under the direction of Anastasia. Beatings, mayhem, and murders came fast, one after another, and Manhattan and Brooklyn were terrorized. There were no witnesses. Those who had been beaten feared to testify against their attackers. Those who were killed, couldn't.

With these hoodlums behind him, Anastasia moved against the Longshoremen's unions and little by little, union by union, took over the Brooklyn and New York waterfronts. Appeals were made first to Joey Adonis and then to Luciano. Both said they were powerless to act, that whoever it was that was wreaking the havoc were beyond their control. They advised the complainants to talk to Buchalter.

Adonis decided things were getting a little out of hand and went to Buchalter himself.

JAKE "GURRAH" SHAPIRO

"The boys are playing it a little rough, Louis," Adonis said. "I smell heat. Do we want heat?"

Buchalter leaned back in his chair and made a tent of his fingers. At that moment he resembled a priest about to intone a prayer. "Heat?" Buchalter said. "Who for, Joey? You? Me? Jake?"

"Not immediately, Louis. Heat begins generally. Arrests are made. Small fry. He talks. Somebody above him is picked up. Maybe two or three or four other guys are picked up. One of them talks."

"Sure, Joey," Buchalter agreed, "and suddenly it stops. The cops come to a blank wall. I gave you instructions. You gave them

to Anastasia. Anastasia probably gave his orders to Pittsburg Phil or Abe Reles. Do you think Anastasia will ever talk?"

"Nope. Never."

"Pittsburgh Phil?"

Adonis shook his head.

"Abe Reles?"

"I doubt it."

"Okay. There's going to be heat. Who's going to get burned? You see, Joey, there's nothing to worry about. A few guys get picked up. We send our mouthpiece over to get a writ of habeas corpus and we get the guys out of the can. The ones who maybe talked a little—well," he paused, snapped his fingers. "No more talk."

Buchalter leaned forward. "Joey, you've come up a long way, right to the top. You know why? I'll tell you. You're not afraid of heat because you've learned never to position yourself where you could get it. It's the same with us, with Jake and me. It's the same with Anastasia. If you begin to run scared now you'll lose a lot of what you've gained and you'll drop, little by little, a little here and a little there, and before you know it you'll be out. I'm talking to you like a friend. I'm going to forget you said anything here today. So will Jake."

Buchalter paused, then leaned forward. "One more thing, we're in a rough game. Everything goes. The regular rules don't apply. You know that. Besides, we have some powerful friends in the police department, some judges, a few district attorneys, and a few important politicians. We've greased them for some time. They'll protect us because in protecting us they protect themselves. You see, Joey? That's the name of the game. Take some and give some. In that way you stop a lot of trouble for yourself. Anything else?"

"No, Louis. I just wanted to talk to you. I wanted to know how you felt about the situation. There's been quite a few killings."

"There's always been quite a few killings. It began with Cain. Then, there were only two of them in this world. What did Abel do to deserve killing?"

Shapiro, who had a caustic sense of humor at times, said, "Abel probably ratted to Adam that Cain swiped a few apples from the tree."

Adonis stared at Shapiro. "Apples? What apples?"

"From Adam's pushcart," Shapiro said. "Where else?"

The joke fell flat for Adonis. He forgot that Shapiro extracted tribute from every pushcart peddlar on the Lower East Side, and those who didn't pay he drove from the streets with his order that had given him his nickname—"Gurrah here!"

Adonis rose. "Okay, Louis. I'll

go along. You know that I've got a lot of interests in Brooklyn now. I don't want anything to happen to them because of excessive heat."

"Yes, Joey, I know all about your interests in Brooklyn. I was in on the meeting when the Council voted to give you the territory. I voted for you. By the way, that was a real big shipment of stuff that came in last week. About forty kilos, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Forty kilos. There'll be another shipment in next week, should be about the same size."

"You're doing a great job there. Everybody appreciates it."

"Thanks." Adonis rose, started to leave.

Shapiro said, "Joey, in Russian we have a saying, if you worry about burning the cake before you put it in the oven the cake will burn. You know what I mean?"

Adonis grinned. "Yeah, Jake, I know. My mother, who speaks French, once said to me, '*Gardez bien*'. That means, *Take care*!" He smiled knowingly, turned and walked out.

IN THE END, Joey Adonis was proved to be right. The heat got too strong and none of Buchalter's connections could do anything to end it or diminish it. As is always the case, it was one killing, that of an innocent candy store owner in this case, that brought on one of the most searching investigations in the history of New York and Brooklyn. Before it was over, Buchalter went to the chair along with five other members of Murder Inc. Lucky Luciano went to prison for a term of 30 years, and Jake Shapiro was to die in a prison cell.

However, it was Buchalter's setup of chain information that saved Adonis. The only ones who could put the finger on him, Anastasia and Pittsburgh Phil, refused to give the district attorneys the time of day.

After leaving the meeting with Buchalter and Shapiro, Adonis set about to seeing that his own house was in order. He made peace with Willie and Solly Moretti and established himself in Johnny "Duke" DeNoia's restaurant which was a meeting place for local hoods and those in from out of town. He received messages there andso avoided the harmful possibility of having his phone bugged.

Dick Bennett, one of DeNoia's lieutenants, was recruited by Adonis in handling details of one kind or another that Adonis didn't want to handle himself. He also engaged Tony "Greenie" Greeno *nee* Guarini and Arthur Longano as managers of several gambling casinos he established

in Bergen County which became a modern pirates' lair.

It was the era of the bribe, the fixing of corrupt police and judges, politicians, schemers, crooked lawyers and bail bondsmen. The great to-do over the Watergate affair, while it has reached into the highest places of government, is as nothing compared to what went on not only in Bergen County under Adonis' machinations alone but in every major city in the country.

To say that some of this corruption also went as far as Washington would not be remiss. Certainly, Tom Pendergast, who was responsible for putting Harry Truman in the White House, and was the political boss of Missouri for years before he, too, went to prison, had connections in Washington and used them. Frank Costello had Huey "Kingfish" Long of Louisiana, when that worthy was governor, in his pocket. Nucky Johnson in Atlantic City was another corrupt official who went to prison.

William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson, mayor of Chicago during the time of Johnny Torrio and Al Capone, was one of the worst. So it was, city after city. Cleveland, Detroit, Miami, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, or/and dozens of other cities.

Sooner or later an honest district attorney or police official had to come along who was dedicated to the public interest and would attempt to smash gangland's hold on a helpless society. Such a man was Frank S. Hogan, District Attorney of New York City.

Hogan had information that many of New York's top hoods were making frequent trips over the George Washington Bridge to Bergen County. The meeting place was Duke's restaurant. Hogan obtained court orders for legalized bugging of the restaurant.

After weeks of taping the calls, and through information he received from stool pigeons, Hogan had a clear picture of what was going on not only in Bergen County but in Brooklyn and New York City as well.

Buchalter and most of the killers in Murder Incorporated had been executed in Sing Sing Prison. Jake Shapiro was in prison where he ultimately died. Lucky Luciano was in prison for a term of from thirty to fifty years. There were two men left who, according to all the information and evidence gathered, were now running the rackets. Vito Genovese and Joe Adonis.

Joe Adonis sat at the head of the Council table in a back room of Duke's restaurant. On his right sat Albert Anastasia. Next in command were the Moretti brothers, Willie and Solly. Others around the table were

Anthony "Tony Bender" Strollo, a power on the docks of Lower Manhattan and New Jersey, Dick Bennett, Tony Guarini, and Arthur Longano.

Duke's restuarant, located at 783 Palisades Avenue in Cliffside Park across the street from the Palisades Amusement Park, served excellent food and the finest wines and liquors. The uninitiated never suspected that it was the headquarters of a criminal syndicate.

The back room had a private entrance and was insulated against sound so that innocent diners in the restaurant never heard a word of what was said there, or if someone were murdered in the room. Whether or not the many politicians, judges, and high police officials who dined there frequently knew it for what it was is a moot point.

In a report filed by District Attorney Hogan on March 31, 1941, on information he had received from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, was this memorandum:

"The following known hoodlums are frequent visitors to Duke's restaurant, Joseph Doto alias Joe Adonis, Thomas 'Three-Finger Brown' Luchese, Peter LaPlaca, Dick Bennett, Willie and Solly Moretti, Vito Genovese, and Anthony Guarini and Arthur Longano known to be the chief lieutenants for Adonis."

Adonis at this time was a prime suspect in the murders of a dozen or more men whom he had ordered killed. All that was needed was the testimony of Abe Reles who was being held under the strictest kind of security in the Half Moon Hotel in Coney Island. On November 12, 1941, Abe Reles fell or was pushed from the sixth floor of the hotel. He plunged to the hotel's concrete kitchen roof, a two-story extension, forty-two feet below, and landed on his back. The fall broke his spine.

If there was any collusion between the six police officers who had been assigned to guard Reles and the underworld there can be only one answer. The payoff had to come from Joe Adonis who, with Bugsy Siegel and Frankie Carbo, had the most to lose if Reles lived to testify.

No longer threatened with prison, Adonis took over the reins of the criminal empire that operated out of Duke's restaurant. His influence stretched from New Jersey throughout New York State, and west as far as Los Angeles where Bugsy Siegel was in complete command.

For more than ten years he ruled with an iron hand unmolested, although he was questioned more than a dozen times by district attorneys in New Jersey and New York. During that period most of the top hoods in the country, the most powerful

men in the criminal syndicate, visited Duke's restaurant for meetings with Adonis.

It is pointed out here that millions of dollars passed through the hands of crime bosses daily. That much money had to be handled with the greatest kind of business acumen. Advising Adonis were Johnny Torio, until his death in April 1957, Meyer Lansky, and Tony Bender, three of the most astute business minds in the history of the Mafia.

There was only one place that the huge sums of money obtained through illegal enterprises —gambling, shylocking, narcotics, prostitution, interstate thefts, and robberies—could be placed to advantage, and that was in legal ventures. Millions upon millions of dollars were plowed into hotels, gambling casinos, restaurants, laundries, auto agencies, trucking firms, real estate, and dozens of other businesses.

In order to do this efficiently there had to be organization and control, a board of directors, managerial roles, and an infinite amount of subterfuge in bookkeeping and accounting so that ownership could not be traced to the holders of equity.

The complex system that was set up befuddled the IRS's most able accountants. A parent organization and its many holding companies simply could not be traced to any one person because every company, large and small, was registered under fictitious names. There were hundreds of stockholders, and dozens of individuals who held controling interests. The skeins led everywhere and nowhere.

Thus, because mobsters from every part of the country had a piece of the action and were a part of the organization involved in these legitimate enterprises, it was a common thought that a national criminal syndicate existed.

There was no such thing. There never was. Each family was a separate and distinct entity. There were brothers, cousins, in-laws throughout the so-called Mafia, to give it a name, but there the unity ended.

Joe Adonis, like Torrio, Lansky, and Bender, had intelligence, imagination, and a grasp of high finance. Assistant District Attorney Andrew J. Seidler, one of Hogan's aides in the investigation revolving around Duke's restaurant, called Adonis the sharpest mind of the four and added, "There very likely never has been a more complete autocrat in the underworld."

What Seidler meant was that Adonis was completely indifferent to subordinates, to their convenience or feelings. Any time something had to be done, Adonis would call out as many as twenty

men or more even though only two or three were needed. He would select those he wanted and let the others cool their heels for hours until he dismissed them.

MEETINGS were held on each Tuesday at Duke's during lunch. The Big Six—Adonis, Costello, Lansky, Longy Zwillman, Tony Accardo and Jake Guzik, sat at one table and heard complaints or requests from underlings or lesser bosses, noted them, and then passed on them. Never at any time was any other hood permitted to sit in with the Big Six in a decision or policy making session.

Again, it is here pointed out that this did not constitute a unified criminal syndicate. In the handling and operating of the many businesses across the country it was necessary for those having pieces of the action to get together and either evolve practices, alter them, or include some subordinate because of services rendered for a small slice. When it came down to a final decision on a matter of importance it was always Adonis who made it and the others concurred.

The extent of Adonis' power has to be equated with the fact that Longy Zwillman, one of the most ruthless hoods during the Prohibition Era and who had made a partner of Adonis, still played a secondary role, and this

LEPKE BUCHALTER

despite the fact that he had more political clout in New Jersey than Adonis.

Zwillman had never guessed wrong on an election in New Jersey in two decades and had, it was said, an influential voice in the election of the State's Attorney General.

Tony Accardo and Jake Guzik had taken over the Chicago mob after Capone went to prison and Frank Nitti committed suicide. Surely, these two were as powerful in their own right as Adonis, yet they submitted themselves to Adonis' will, decisions, and command.

Frank Costello, who also had

made Adonis a partner in his gambling operations, and was a power in behind-the-scenes political elections in New York City and New Orleans, always abided by any decisions Adonis made whether or not he agreed with them.

Meyer Lansky, the genius who handled millions of dollars of mob money which he invested in gambling and other enterprises, and was highly regarded as a master-mind in finance by the various big-shot hoods who poured vast amounts of money into his hands without question, never argued with Adonis or contended any decision he made. He seemed to cater to Adonis and included him along with Costello in various gambling operations in Saratoga, New York and Miami when both ran wide open.

There were others, in the second-echelon, and who were to become top leaders, who bowed to Adonis' will, among them, Gerardo "Jerry" Catena who was closely aligned with Zwillman, Vincent "Jimmy Blue Eyes" Alo, Tommy Eboli, later to be executed for some reason or other, but a close associate of Vito Genovese who was to become the *Capo di Capo* or boss of bosses after the banishment of Adonis to Italy.

Each of these mobsters, hard, tough, intelligent men who had killed or ordered killings and who could have put out a contract on Adonis by simply raising a finger, nevertheless followed him faithfully. It goes without saying that Adonis had to be something special as an organizer and leader.

In effect, he was ruthless, deadly, a man without conscience, Mephistophelian, but always composed to the point of quiet studiousness. In a way, he was a great deal like Buchalter whose sad eyes belied the murderous mind behind them.

To understand fully the whys and wherefores of the immense power and influence Adonis held over other mobsters the record discloses that the total take on various gambling games, baseball, basketball, football, prizefights, and horse racing went as high as four billion dollars a year in New York City alone.

In New Jersey, a Senator once charged, the crime syndicate realized a gross profit of more than a million dollars a day from all their rackets! In addition, the take from the many gambling casinos that Adonis established throughout the northern New Jersey area, miniature Monte Carlos, ran into millions of dollars monthly! The exact amounts, if known, would stagger the mind.

A large percentage of this money found its way into the

hands of corrupt politicians and police officials for protection. A police official earning seven or eight thousand dollars a year at the time could hardly refuse twice that amount monthly simply by turning his head.

So long as there weren't any homicides involved, and Adonis was very careful to see to it that bodies were not strewn on the streets and so raise a hue and cry from citizens and the press, what harm was there? No one forced anyone to gamble. The same attitude was taken by politicians whose pockets were lined with thousand-dollar bills.

The end had to come sooner or later. Despite the protection of cops and politicians, when the heat is turned on by honest district attorneys and police officials, and there are many of them, as well as judges, legislators, and other law-enforcement agencies, the corrupt cops and officials have to back off. The law of self-preservation then becomes the first rule of all.

The evidence gathered by District Attorney Hogan was turned over to a New Jersey grand jury and Adonis was indicted in 1951 on charges of conspiracy to violate the gambling laws. A minor charge, true, but it was to be the springboard that was to result in Adonis' deportation. Adonis was indicted with Meyer Lansky.

Both were convicted. Lansky drew a 90-day sentence but District Attorney Hogan's influence led the charge against Adonis and the judge sentenced Adonis to a term from two to three years. It was the beginning of the end.

While Adonis was in prison investigators were assigned the task of finding grounds on which to deport him. Earl Greenleaf, one of the investigators, learned that Adonis was not born in Passaic, New Jersey on November 5, 1901, as he had declared. He had given the address where he was born as 36 State Street. Greenleaf proved by city records that the house had not been built until four years later.

Greenleaf now began to search the records of New York City. It was a long and tedious task but at the end he learned that a Michele Doto came to New York from Italy in 1906 and that three years later his wife and four sons arrived. One of the sons, Giuseppe, aged six, was listed on the passport. He then searched the 1905 census records. No Doto was listed. Another investigator working with Greenleaf named Martin Peters searched the 1915 records. There was the record of the family, including Joseph Doto.

Greenleaf and Peters continued their investigations and found a detective named Thomas R. Conley who recalled arresting

Joe Doto in 1922 on charges of assaulting a girl. When Doto was booked he admitted that he was born in Italy. All this was still not enough to begin deportation proceedings.

What was needed was to prove that Adonis had left the country and returned without an admission that he was an alien. Letters and calls to Italian officials finally provided proof that Giuseppe Doto had been born in Montemarano, Italy, on November 22, 1902.

Deportation proceedings were immediately instituted. A long legal battle ensued with some of the best lawyers money could provide defending Adonis. The end finally came when Adonis was confronted with two perjury indictments charging him with lying under oath about his citizenship.

He now faced a long term in prison if convicted. He had had enough of prison. The idea of a narrow six by eight cell, the drab prison fare, the dull routine, the separation from all that he had learned to love in the luxurious life he had led and would have to forfeit was just too much. The smart thing to do was to admit to the falsifications and accept deportation.

After all, Lucky Luciano was in Italy, as were dozens of other hoods who had been deported. And, for good measure, Italy was a beautiful country with beautiful women. Rome, Venice, Naples, Milan, Florence, were wonderful cities steeped in tradition and far more beautiful than the concrete jungles of New York and New Jersey. What could be bad about it?

After a three-year legal battle which began in 1953, he was finally deported on January 3, 1956. He left in style, first-class, but not before all his many holdings had been bought up by members of the Big Six. The millions of dollars he realized from the transfer of his properties was transfered to Swiss banks under a secret code number.

In Italy he took a plush apartment and settled down to enjoy the good life. After a time, however, he found doing nothing a bore and the hunger for action ate at him. He was closely watched by the Italian police as was Luciano. Whenever the two got together they found Italian detectives on their tails.

They held secret meetings at one place or another, or got together in the apartment of one of the many lady friends they knew. There were parties, drinking, a lot of singing by the guests, but Adonis and Luciano sat in a corner of the room and talked quietly.

It was rumored from time to time that Luciano was involved in the international drug traffic

but it was never proved. From time to time Adonis' name came up in conjunction with Luciano's but here, too, there was no proof that Adonis was involved in anything illegal.

The information that found its way back to various members of the mob in the United States was that Adonis was living a quiet life. He also itched to get back to the United States but he knew that was an impossibility The days, weeks, months went by, flowed from one year into another and gradually, little by little, his name ceased to appear in newspapers.

Lucky Luciano died of a heart attack. Jake Guzik died of a heart attack. Longy Zwillman hanged himself. Willie Moretti was murdered in a restaurant in New Jersey. One by one the members of the Big Six died or were murdered or retired from the crime scenes Two remained. Tony Accardo, who retired, the only one who never had seen the inside of a jail.

Meyer Lansky went to Israel, stayed there for two years until he finally was extradited and returned to Miami to face charges of skimming money from the Flamingo Hotel casino. He beat the rap. He faces another in Las Vegas. He is a sick old man suffering from a heart condition.

In 1972, in Milan, Italy, Joe Adonis called Joey A, and born Giuseppe Doto, died of a heart attack, one of America's master criminals, a man who never carried a gun but was responsible for the murders of many men whom he ordered killed.

The man who carried out his orders, Albert Anastasia, finally was murdered himself as he sat in a barber chair in the Park Central Hotel in New York City.

Coming In The July Issue:

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

FRANK COSTELLO

MINISTER OF THE UNDERWORLD

by DAVID MAZROFF

This time they gave Ed Noon a doozie—to find out why a great violinist's solos always killed his piano player!

VIOLIN SOLO FOR A CORPSE

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

I ANSWERED the doorbell that night to find Gregory standing on the threshold. Gregory was maybe one of the, if not the finest violinist in the world. The damned instrument talked in his hands.

He marched towards me, cornering me in the apartment, his arms pushed out in the old grand manner. A light opera cloak hung from his shoulders and his head trained on me like a dark revolver. When it came

to music, he was a pistol, all right.

"Well, then, Edward, old friend. Are you prepared for the greatest evening of my career?"

The Gregory *basso* was also poised, arrogant, teeming with the self-confidence that is a necessary part of the equipment when you're a true virtuoso. Along with his marvelous hands and perfect on-stage manner, he was every inch the Master Violin. The *First* Violin.

"Isn't every performance the greatest, Gregory? By the way, you're early."

"Some would have it so. I wanted to talk to you, Edward, before we go to the hall."

I stared at him.

"You invited me to your concert as a pal. I hope this doesn't turn out to be a job for a private detective, after all."

His mouth fell open. "Listen to the man! No, no, I do not need your forty-five, my friend. Only your ear."

"You've had that since I heard you do *The Flight Of The Bumble Bee*. What gives?"

I'm no music critic but I never fooled myself about Gregory. As violinists go, he shared the top drawer with Menuhin, and immortals like Paganini. Only recently, he was putting them all in the shade because he had worked up his own interpretation of tough nuts like Stravinsky and Beethoven to say nothing of Brahms and Khatchaturian.

I finished pouring myself into a monkey suit while he spread his cloak across one of my living room chairs and aimed his walking stick at my rear end. I watched him in the mirror. He didn't look exactly serene. Something was bothering him.

"From this position, I could injure you very severely, my friend." He jabbed the walking stick like a fencing foil. "What time is it, Edward?"

"Not yet seven. Nerves, Maestro?"

It was a foolish question. The man had no nerves, whatsoever. Such a quality had only fulfilled his brilliance, enhanced the effect he had on people when he walked from the wings onstage. But he was paying too much attention to the walking stick in his fingers, turning it first one way and then another, as if it were a baton. It was of black, highly polished malacca; a Cadillac among canes. But it didn't call for this kind of admiration. I turned away from the mirror and smiled. Gregory's dark eyes seemed like pin-points, his hawk nose was tense and his color was pale.

"Okay, Maestro. It's a fine stick. I might add, a brilliant walking stick. I've always

wanted it for my very own. Are you auctioning it off?"

"What am I bid?" He held it up, eyes twinkling.

"Two bits and all my old tie pins."

The spell was broken. Gregory erupted with laughter and sat back more naturally on the chair.

"A thousand pardons, Edward. I am an idiot! You were saying—"

"What's eating you, Gregory?"

"But nothing, Edward!" he insisted a little too strongly.

I opened a bureau drawer, selecting the personal items to carry with the dress clothes. Everything except a .45.

"There's something on your mind, Mr. G. Maybe a frank, honest confession will help. Fess up, Maestro. Did you seduce the third fiddle's sweetheart?"

A laugh bolted from him again. The cane was forgotten. "My friend, you are a tonic. I have been a fool."

"That depends. What are we talking about now?"

He waved the stick, all the old bombast returning. His dark eyes snapped. "These social affairs—so tiring! You recall last night I was guest of honor at Lady Dundy's—or is her name Bentley?"

"—Dun*ley*. The Park Avenue matron who wants to feed half of Europe with gambling funds."

"Dundy, Dunley. No matter. I was most indiscreet, Edward. Some person, a curious mixture, was telling fortunes. Reading the hand. Palmistry! I was forced into it, I tell you!"

I laughed. He bridled at the sound.

"These people who shove one into things! My hostess insisted!"

I motioned him toward the door. It would pay to get to the Hall ahead of the overflow crowds. He heaved his shoulders and got to his feet. I switched off the lights and locked the door. His story ran on uninterrupted.

"—a Madame Zarma, I think. It was she who read my hand. It was all so strange. A huge success however. She caused quite a sensation. Reading the palm of the great Gregory."

I rang for the elevator. "She found out you had six fingers on your left hand instead of five?"

For a second, he scowled at me. "But how did you know she read my left hand?"

"Palm readers always do. That way they can see wedding rings, engagement rings. Etcetera. Go on."

He looked worried again and didn't continue. The jaded and

wan look had returned to his face.

"Well," I prodded him. "There must be more."

"Oh, the usual thing." His chuckle was a small sound. "She began the ordinary run on. Money, great fame, a trip to Europe and then—"

I could see he was hedging and as the cage door opened I half-shoved him in. He stood in one corner of the narrow car as we dropped. "These charlatans! Her face drew dark. Ominous. And she would say no more. I confess I grew rather alarmed. What would you have done? When I pressed the creature for further information, she said all was black, she could see nothing. She had lost the call, it seemed. It was a huge hit with everyone, I can tell you." Small beads of perspiration lit up his dark face.

"You're not going to be a kid about this, are you?"

He snorted. We had reached the street.

"Nothing so ineffectual. It is simply that my nerves were overstrung. From that charity concert the night before, you recall? I am a fool to admit it but the woman's overtures tended to upset me. Last night, I had the bad dream."

I had no answer for his sudden reversion of character. I had to remember his European ancestry. In that territory, history is steeped in myths, fables and old wives' tales.

"I'll call a cab," I said, changing the subject. He grabbed my arm like I was running away.

"It is but a ten minute walk. Do you mind, Edward? The promenade will do me good."

"Suit yourself."

It was cold October weather so I turned up my collar. We headed down Central Park West toward the Hall. Gregory walked briskly, his opera cape flying.

"Damn the woman," he muttered again. "To be put on like that!"

"Of course, you realize that tea-leaf reading has gone out as one of the standard sciences?"

"Do not joke, Edward. I pay no tribute to this character. As I said, she merely caught me off balance."

WE DROPPED the subject after that, walking in silence until we reached the Hall, gleaming on the side street. A long line of standees was already visible. Gregory's face warmed up at the sight. We parted at the corner so he could duck the crowd which hovered near the artist's entrance for autographs. I had an up front box seat, courtesy of the Maestro himself.

"Knock them dead, Gregory.

Regards to that accompanist of yours."

Gregory's eyes twinkled in their dark pools.

"Valentin? Assuredly. He thinks very highly of you, Edward, since you showed him some Karate lessons that day. Poor boy. So sensitive and easy to hurt."

We shook hands. He seemed to have completely forgotten his bad time with the palm reader. Satisfied, I left him.

I gave my ticket to a uniformed doorman and drifted into the Hall. The music-loving genre was already gathering, kicking up an ermine and silk hat storm. I saw a ton of white scarfs dangling from coat pockets, folded opera hats and fur coats, ladies young and old. It was my constant impression of music and the rich. Fur, silk, and empty heads.

Who had really come to enjoy Gregory's work? So much of his love of classical music was studied, a fad, a convention for rich people, a chance to show off the latest diamond necklace or chinchilla. I pushed through the perfumed pack, gained the theatre proper and found my way to my seat.

Several boxes away, the Mayor nodded to me and I waved my program back at him. People sitting nearby noticed him and began to point him out. I looked at the program.

Gregory was biting off quite a musical chaw tonight. Sibelius, Brahms and Beethoven. With Valentin on the piano. There was a program note to the effect that the Great Gregory was playing the one thousandth engagement of his career with this booking at the Hall.

Noises fell off and the pit musicians were beginning to shuffle in, silently and regimentally. They took their places behind music racks and instruments. Rodor Fife, the white-haired batonist, made his entrance from Stage Left and a burst of applause greeted him. Fife was immaculate and leonine in tuxedo and white tie. The audience was getting Fife and the Great Gregory for the price of one ticket.

The house lights dimmed, Fife waved his baton, a bull fiddle boomed and the string section flared in a whispering breeze union of violins and cellos. The tall figure of Gregory strode from the wings. A spotlight followed him to the center of the stage. The Hall exploded with an ovation. Gregory bowed, once to the left, then center, then to the right, then center again. It was a flawless pantomime and the cult went nuts.

When the cone of light winked out, being replaced by a diffused glow of amber, the crowd hushed. A handsome grand piano could be seen in the shadowy depths of the stage.

Seated at it was Valentin. I could see his thin hands, the glasses, the nervous, tongue-in-cheek look of him. He had needed the Karate lessons, all right. He was the sort of young guy who every other young guy would think was a 'Sissy'. The price of a childhood spent in learning and mastering the keyboard. To be able to sit and play for an artist like the Great Gregory. That's show biz.

Valentin's piano tinkled softly with an opening bridge and Gregory's head drooped, his chin meeting the Stradivarius. As the young accompanist passed over a tough *scherzo,* the violin spoke.

Nothing else can describe it. Gregory was magic on the Strad. A wizard. In his fantastic fingers, the violin was an extension of the human mind, all the senses rolled into one.

His playing was as swift and sure and thorough as a space ship launching. The story of music unfolded from his hands. His face was unlined, composed. He was not the man who had come into my apartment that night worried about a fortune teller. Complementing him perfectly was Valentin's feathery touch on the keyboard. The keys twinkled and tinkled.

Gregory flashed away, elbow sawing, magical notes pouring out of him like a God. I was wrapped up in the music. Both of the men onstage were working toward that priceless moment where piano and violin sideswipe like two birds in flight. Of course birds never collide; they don't even come close to it but that was the feeling you got all the same.

It came rapidly. The moment.

Gregory slid down the scale all the way and Valentin's piano ran right along with him. Then, suddenly, the music stopped—just like that. For a long moment, the Hall was a churchyard at midnight. Then the violin made one screeching sound like a scream. The piano remained dead.

Gregory was turned, back to the audience, the Strad dangling from his right arm, the bow intertwined. I started to get to my feet. The silence of the stage was now broken by the wooden clatter of the Strad falling. Gregory was staring dumbly, unable to move. My eyes followed his.

Slumped over the keyboard, his thin figure as indefinite as a rag doll's was Valentin. His face lolled against the black-

and-white keys, turned outward and upward as if he was trying to see the proscenium arch the hard way.

The awful flush of that face told me all I needed to know. Even from where I sat, as the brocaded curtain fell to close off the audience, I could see that Valentin wouldn't need any more Karate lessons. Gregory was frozen where he stood.

I got backstage in a hurry.

The stagehands had taken over. A white drape was placed over the piano. Grips, lightmen and directors and officials were milling about in confusion. A gaggle of them were grouped around Gregory, trying to keep him on his feet. His face was a white mask without a drop of blood in it. He looked terrible.

His press agent, a man named Hendricks, was doing his best to restore some kind of order onstage. I grabbed his arm. He knew me from several cocktail times with the Maestro.

"What happened?"

"Oh, Noon. Hello." He wagged his head. "It's Valentin. Heart attack. Never saw anyone go so fast. Just like that." He clicked his fingers.

"Heart attack?"

"You heard me. Imagine, right in the middle of a performance."

"How's Gregory?"

"See for yourself. Not a peep out of him since we dropped the curtain." With that Hendricks forgot all about me and called over his shoulder. "Where the hell's that damn house physician?"

I pawed through the mob suffocating Gregory. I didn't like what I saw in his face. His dark hair was undone like an old mop, his eyes were burned out. I reached down and buttoned up his rumpled jacket, like I was his old man and he was a sick, disappointed kid.

"Chin up, Maestro. Just a tough break."

He seemed to see me for the first time. His hands shot out, closing around my wrists. "Edward! You saw—*a heart attack.*

How is that? Valentin was a mere boy. A boy of twenty five—"

"Que sera, sera."

"But children don't die of heart attacks!"

"It's unusual," I admitted slowly, "but it happens. A pity, all right. He was great tonight."

Gregory's face lit up again, looney-bin style. I didn't like that at all. "Was he not? A fitting *Swan Song*. . . ." His voice fell to a whisper and his eyes ignored the people standing around, gawking. "Edward, do you imagine there is any connection with what we were discussing early this—"

"Cut that out. Get hold of yourself, Gregory. What happened was due to a bad heart. Period. The cops will be here soon enough. Don't go coloring this accident up with witch-hunts and beer suds readings."

He tried to smile. "I am the fool, am I not? It is because I am so tired. You are right, Edward. I will say nothing. The devil take Madame Zarma!"

"Good. That's a relief. You had me wondering there for a minute. I can't handle a crazy violin player. It's out of my league."

Later on, the law was satisfied with the D.O.A. status of one Arthur Valentin. It was going to be written off as a fatal accident. There was nothing left for me to do but to take Gregory home. Not even Press Agent Hendricks was allowed that honor.

Gregory was still off his feet when I left him at the door of his Tudor Place home. I tried to cheer him up but the parting shot I chose was what they charitably call ill-timed.

"Well, Maestro. You'll have to take care of your next accompanist. The good ones are scarcer than hen's teeth, from what I hear."

Several shades paler than white was the color of his face. His teeth gritted together like meshing gears.

"What do you mean by that remark?"

I apologized, feeling stupid. So he calmed down and begged my pardon for flying off the handle. But when the door closed behind him, I knew I was leaving one very worried man.

Going home in the cab, I was pretty puzzled by his sudden regard for a phony mystic at a cocktail party. What the hell. Nobody can read the future as far as I'm concerned. If they could, then why didn't they bet on horses or pick lottery winners?

To hell with Madame Zarma, indeed.

Weeks passed and nobody

saw or heard of the Great Gregory by word or deed. I figured he was searching for Valentin's replacement. His concert work depended on an accompanist. So October changed into November and one fine day I dropped in on Gregory at the apartment where he usually holed up for the winter months.

He answered the door himself and it was good to see him smiling, so I said as much.

"Come in, come in. You shall see why."

I said I could guess; his eyes flickered over my face.

"You can? But how?"

"It's easy. You've found another piano player."

His eyes widened. "You are an extraordinary man, Edward. You have hit it on the nose. And this is he." We had entered a grand opera sort of apartment living room, complete with stuffed animals, oil canvases and baroque junk. A thin, nervous-looking kid came forward to shake hands. I saw large eyes behind thick glasses, a thick nose and a small hole of a mouth. Another Valentin model. It was a dull face but I said nothing.

Gregory, a Turkish dressing gown wrapped about him like a shroud, waved his 'find' to the piano squatting in front of the French doors by the terrace.

"Algernon is a wonderful musician, Edward. He has a rare gift for the keyboard. Show him, protege. Play a little something. Chopin, if you will."

The boy, he looked about twenty two, was an eager beaver. He practically ran to the piano stool, sat down and whisked through a light-fingered, faultless rendition of the *Polonaise*. Even as I listened, I watched Gregory. He was as happy as a lark with its belly full. Algernon was a tribute to Gregory's ear. The Maestro couldn't miss with the rest of his concert. He could tour the world with a pianist like this new man.

Gregory waved a hand when the kid was done. Algernon looked proud, accepted a few compliments from me and then marched from the room. Oddly enough, he started to cough on his way out and kept on coughing until I couldn't hear him anymore.

"Poor fellow. He has a chronic sore throat. I hope he can control it during a performance. A drink, Edward?" He drew a bottle of claret from a side cabinet.

"All over your scare, Maestro?"

"Completely. It was a shock, you understand. That gypsy woman and then my Valentin dies! Now, happily, all is well with Gregory."

I knew he was feeling better. When he spoke of himself in the third tense, he was operating on all six cylinders again.

"That's good news. Any trouble with bookings?"

"Never. All lamented the bad accident, but only postponed the schedule. None cancelled. As Hendricks says, it was good for the box office. A sensation. In two weeks, this boy will be ready."

I sipped my claret, wishing once again he had a stronger taste in drinks.

"Where did you pick this genius up?"

"I held open auditions. He stood out from all the rest. It is always like that with a genuine talent. Such hands—" He let out a sigh. "Unfortunately, he has bad eyes. This could hamper him, of course, but with those special lenses of his—"

A crash of sound interrupted him. It came from another of the rooms. Glass tinkled and a thudding noise, like something falling. I put down my drink. Gregory cried out. The expression I'd seen on his face the night of Valentin's swan song was back again. Startled, all color gone, afraid.

"Was that the bathroom?" Gregory's voice was like a ragged file.

With a burst of sudden speed, he dashed across the room through the door that Algernon had taken. I raced after him. Through a maze of rooms, parquet floors, dim alcoves. I caught sight of his exotic robe billowing into a tiled bathroom. When I caught up with him, he was struck dumb in the doorway, staring down at the tiles.

Algernon was folded over the bathroom sink. Broken shards of glass, which reconstructed would make a fancy crystal goblet, lay scattered around his feet. The mirrored door of the medicine cabinet hung open. On the porcelain sink, a small bottle of some kind was lying alongside one of the faucets, trailing a muddy, red trail of liquid down into the basin. You don't have to be a druggist to recognize iodine when you see it.

Gregory couldn't move. I stepped past him, quickly.

Algernon's homely face was a puffed, straining lump of dough. He coughed, a bubble of froth dancing in his hole of a mouth. He retched violently but only the sound came out of him. Nothing else. He was down on his knees, digging his fingers into his stomach as if to hold it together. Afraid to let go because he could fall apart.

I got him out of there onto a bed. Gregory finally moved to help. I called the house doctor

as fast as I could. The awful truth toppled out of Algernon even as I dialed.

". . .wanted. . .cough medicine. . . mistake. . . iodine. . . oh, get me something. . . . . ."

After that, I found the kitchen and the refrigerator. I broke some eggs, used mustard and even tried to force my fingers down his throat. All the emetic tricks in the world to get him to throw up. None of them worked. I don't know why. Gregory was useless altogether. He stood by, dazed, shaking like an adagio dancer.

When the doctor finally came, the damage had been done. Algernon had swallowed too much iodine; he already had a lousy stomach system and his come-back quotient was non-existent. I've seen a lot of stiffs but never one that died from accidental iodine poisoning.

When the doctor put a sheet over his dead face, Gregory went reeling back into a chair like he'd never get up again himself. I can't forget the solid disbelief and bewilderment that had found a home in his eyes.

Two accompanists.

Two tragic deaths.

Both young men in their twenties.

Both playing piano for the same noted musician.

The papers had a field day.

The *Morning Post* ran a half-page cartoon on Gregory's peculiar fix. A caricature of the Great One sawing at his violin while two apparitions sit at the piano in the background. One wraith mockingly asking the other ghostly partner: *"Who's he going to get this time?"*

The magic of Gregory's name dimmed. No accompanist came knocking at his door. The music world is just as superstitious as the rest of the performing arts. For a time, Gregory's trouble was the talk of Broadway and the music halls. After that, nothing. His name and his genius seemed to pass from the language. His tour was cancelled and *Variety* listed no future bookings for him. He went into hiding. Nobody knew where he had gone. An old fortune teller's nonsense and a weird pair of accidents had driven him from the highest mountain to the very bottom of the valley. The public forgot about him. There are just too many other goldfish in the big swimming pool of stars.

There was a vacancy after that. The concert season came and went but there was no Gregory to make a Stradivarius do tricks. He had brought showmanship to a profession that needed all the color it could get. When it came to violins, every other Strad player

was just another name on the program.

All I could do was wonder how much truth there is in coincidences which kick a God from the heights of Mt. Olympus. Never having bought the whole business of fortune telling for a second, I did keep remembering Valentin's face, Algernon and the iodine scene and Gregory. Above all, the Maestro. The poor bastard had let his impressionable brain ruin his career where another man would have capitalized on the two deaths and made a mint.

MONTHS LATER, long after I'd forgotten about him too, I was checking on a stolen necklace for a client. The trail took me to Pittsburgh. I remember that night because the possible thief was registered in a hotel downtown and I parked my car several blocks away to walk down the sidestreets to think over a plan of action. It was then that I heard the sound of Gregory playing the violin. There was no mistake. The instrument spoke volumes for him. Nobody else ever played like that.

Tracing the pure sounds filtering through the night brought me to a low-class Italian restaurant. It was pushed back from the street, buried between a cleaning establishment and a real estate office building.

The violin's magical voice drew me like a magnet. Past old-style booths, garish wall designs of marble fountains and an army of red candles flickering in the gloom. You couldn't see the patrons for the candles.

I dropped into an empty booth, without taking off my hat or my coat. I saw him, then. Gregory. No one noticed me. How could they? When the *Maestro* played, the outside world stopped.

He was gliding slowly about the irregular arc of what passed for a stage. I could see the change in him, even in that candle-lit dump.

His eyes were dead ashes, his black hair was peppered with gray, muddy streaks. Even his hawk nose seemed to droop. His mouth was a bitter almond. His dress suit looked rented. Only the violin in his fingers was the old Gregory. That would never change. Some things never do.

As he performed through the glow of candles and perhaps for a half-empty cafe, his notes were still perfect. Slowly, he wended his way through the booths and then he drew the piece to a magnificent close; like the rousing finale of the 1812 Overture. Scattered applause greeted that and he bowed. Almost lifelessly. While

he straightened out of the bow, his eyes caught mine.

He rushed forward, his dead eyes sparkling, as if he hadn't lost something like eighteen months off the calendar.

"Edward, old friend! This is a marvel!"

His handshake wasn't as firm as I wanted it to be but some things have to change. He wasn't the same man, either.

"Well, Maestro. We meet again. I take it everything is okay?"

"What would you? I have no regrets for the past. That is gone. It is comfortable this way."

"Can you sit awhile? I'd like to talk to you—"

"Later, perhaps. I have a few more encores." His smile was sad. "Even in a place like this there are rules."

"Gregory, this is ridiculous. You've got absolutely no business selling a talent like yours for a plate of spaghetti. You belong with real music. Where it starts and ends. In the concert halls."

He shrugged. World-weary. "None want me back, Edward. I am the jinx, the bad penny. The *bete noire*. You are a good friend, but it is true, all the same. I can never revisit the scenes of my triumphs. I am the fool."

I shooed away a waiter approaching with a menu. He was making it harder than I liked. The flat resignation in his voice spelled out *Quitter*.

"Look, you can lick this. All you have to do is pick up a phone, call Rodor Fife, Hendricks, anybody at all. People forget. All they'll remember is how a Strad sounds when you play it. In a year, six months, you'll be as big as you ever were. Bigger. Gregory, the *First* Violin."

"Edward, you are more than generous. But I am sorry. It can never be as it was. I too wish the past. But look about you. These are the only people and the only places that will have me. They know nothing of good music; they just want some sound while they eat and conduct their untidy little intrigues. Love affairs, shady business ventures—"

"Come off it, Gregory. Nothing justified your playing in this dive and you know it."

"I am afraid." He shuddered and the violin twitched in his hands. "I can never play with an accompanist again. Dreams, such dreams I have. Valentin's poor face and that other boy with the bad eyes. . . .no, no. I cannot. I will not. You must understand. I am happy *here*."

I tried to say something else but he had retreated from me. The violin was tucked beneath

his chin again and he was sawing away briskly at one of Borodin's peasant dances from *Prince Igor's Wedding*. It was as if some hidden control switch had activated him. He fairly beat the notes out, whirling around the cafe like a puppet on a string. The patrons didn't know the genius they were getting, for all of the Russian sound of jubilee, conquest and suffering was in that particular selection.

I don't know why I did what I did next. I can't say exactly what pushed me. But I was on my feet, crossing the floor toward a gloomy corner where I had spotted an old upright piano in the glare of the red candles. A piano at which no one was sitting.

Gregory's back was to me.

Even as I slipped onto the stool propped before the piano, I wondered if the lessons that Valentin had given me in exchange for Karate lessons, wouldn't make my performance an utter travesty. I can't say what my reasons were but I think I was trying to prove to Gregory that he could play with an accompanist who would live a long healthy life, no matter what a palm reader would tell him.

Softly, taking great care to hit the right keys, I eased into a meek offering of *Moonlight Sonata*. It wouldn't make too awful a counterpoint for Prince Igor. My eyes were still on Gregory as I stepped lightly across the keyboard. The piano got louder and I watched him, waiting for a reaction. I got one.

A terrible one.

As the tinkling notes reached him, I saw him stiffen in the rented tuxedo, saw his fingertips strain on the strings. And so very suddenly that I struck the wrong note, he whirled. His eyes were two mad sparks. I couldn't go on. He was glaring across the candle-lit room at me, coming forward in a lurching, drunken roll of motion. His face was chalk-white again. He was goggling at me, now. There were veins popping out on his forehead. The Strad was dangling from his limp hand. A great hush had fallen in the room.

His voice rose in a garble of tangled thoughts and memories.

"Valentin! Why have you stopped? Play, I say! Play! Continue the piece or be damned! It's your eyes, you idiot! Your confoundedly stupid sightless eyes! Idiot! Can't you tell iodine from cough syrup? Play, damn you–"

I was frozen where I sat.

I'd started it all and I didn't know how to end it. Gregory did it for me. He hurtled on in

my direction and then suddenly, his face flushed crimson and he went down. Like a toy balloon deflating, sprawling like a rug in the center of the cafe. A female diner let out a scream that had High C written all over it.

When I reached Gregory, he was dead.

His face wore a tight, almost fiendish smile that showed all of his teeth. And even his graceful fingers, the ones that had made violins speak, were arched and clawing like talons.

The people who have names for such things called it death from cerebral hemorrhage. Brought on by extreme shock to the central nervous system and a general breakdown which had been building within the corpse for a long time.

I know little about palm reading or psychoanalysis except that they are possibly the same thing. Still, there is something in Gregory's strange story that just doesn't meet the eye.

The name of the Italian cafe where he had come to die was listed in all the classifieds and newspaper entertainment sections. Even the big marquee in front of the place spelled it out in capital letters tinged with purplish neon.

MADAMA ZARMA'S.

I hadn't noticed it on my way into the place.

And she had never been in New York in her life.

In the Next Issue:

WHO KILLED BABY SISTER

The New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The old man was as strange a character as the detective had ever met, and his request was even crazier: "Please kill my sister," he said flatly. Shayne turned him down, but in a short time found himself involved against his will!

The Hanging Ward

by MATTHEW KISER

It was obviously murder, but the only suspects couldn't have committed it. Each of them were paralysed . . .

THE MURDER was a real morale booster at first, and there was quite a contest on to see who had the most and best information. Even so, from the moment the news began to spread through

the wards at Rancho, the patients, while talking about it and exchanging information, spoke with a sort of awe tinged with that cold chill that hits the emotions when death comes too close.

They are all paralyzed to one degree or another, you see, and are at Rancho Las Suertes, a state hospital near Los Angeles, learning to cope with and, by various means, overcome their handicap. I dropped in to say hello to some of my friends there on the last day of my vacation.

It was Chuck Marks who gave me the news first. As the therapist who handles his physical therapy, we have built up quite a rapport between us, as usually happens between patient and staff members.

"Bill was murdered last night," he said flatly and with excitement only in his eyes. "Strangled."

For a second I thought this was another one of those macabre jokes long term patients are prone to set up. Sometimes the "gang" of men will set up visitors for very elaborate hoaxes.

"Come off it, kid," I told Marks, grinning.

Marks didn't grin back. "No, really," he repeated, "Bill was murdered, strangled, in the Physical Therapy room. The police have been here all day."

I just stared at him. He's only nineteen, and God knows what motivates a kid like that. "I tell you, Dennis," he said with that exasperation patients get when frustrated by a doubting staff, "the guy's dead. Good old joking, happy, easy going Bill Lakewood ain't no more."

I believed him now. "But how in the hell, Marks, could anybody here murder somebody?"

"Nobody knows how it was done. There isn't a single clue to anything," Marks said triumphantly. "No motive, no suspects—outside of everybody—no nothing."

"But what in God's name happened?" I asked emphatically.

Marks got a sly look in his eyes. "Tell you what, push me out to the patio and I'll fill you in."

He's perfectly capable of pushing himself in his wheelchair, but isn't above cadging a push from a sympathetic stranger—or curious therapist—if possible.

I pushed him down the long, and now that I noticed it, strangely empty and quiet hall. As the hushed whisper of the rubber wheels on his chair faintly echoed in the tiled hall, he filled me in on the events.

"After dinner last night, Bill had the orderlies put him to bed. The rest of us went down to the recreation room to play records. When I got back, I noticed Bill wasn't in bed, but I figured he'd decided to go for coffee or something, or maybe some of those re-

latives of his had dropped by, and he'd been transferred into his chair so they could go somewhere together. He doesn't normally stay here on weekends anyway."

"Why was Bill here this weekend?" I wanted to know. Patients who are eligible for a pass generally go home whenever possible, and Bill had plenty of relatives willing to take him in and help him with his dressing and transferring and the numerous small things paraplegics can't always do for themselves.

"Nobody knows. He was sort of on a downer Friday, and not even his girl could convince him to take a pass. He said he wanted to work out in the Physical Therapy room and try to get some muscle tone back.

"Anyway," Marks went on, "I went to bed, and by the way, I did most of the transferring from my chair to the bed by myself. I think I'll be ready for a weekend pass in another week or two."

"Glad to hear it," I said, distractedly, "but go on about Bill." We were almost at the patio by now, and the late sun bothered Marks' eyes. He put on his sunglasses as we passed over the threshold.

"Well, about ten thirty last night, Magpie came by with the pills, and commented about Bill not being in his bed. I told her I didn't know where he was, and Junior chimed in—he'd come back from the rec room by that time as had Mike. Anyway, Junior chimed in, and wanted to know what everybody was talking about. Said he was tired and wanted to sleep, but I know better." Marks grinned and so did I.

Junior Donnely is the biggest gossip in the hospital, and never fails to sneak himself unobtrusively—or obviously if necessary—into every conversation and happening.

"Well," Marks went on, "when I woke up this morning and Bill still wasn't in his bed, I knew there must be something wrong going on in the joint. And when Magpie came by with the pills I was positive. You know she's supposed to get off at midnight."

Marks pointed to a bench in the center of the patio, and I wheeled him toward it, stopping the chair in front of the bench and taking a seat myself.

"You're deliberately dragging this story out," I complained. "Get to the gore."

Marks grinned. "Right, Dennis Lieberman. Down to the gore. The cops came in a little later and questioned everybody, especially the three of us that roomed with Bill. Nobody knew anything, and the cops weren't saying much. Only asking where we were when and how long. They concentrated on me since I have the bed next to Bill, but I sure couldn't say anything.

"After the fuzz left, we got Gretchen, who had finally come in. . .I guess they had let Magpie go home by then. . .to tell us what they were looking for.

"We didn't expect the news we got. About midnight an orderly had noticed a light on in the Physical Therapy room. He went in to turn it off, and found Bill hanging from the power building tower." Marks paused and I tried to picture the scene.

The power building tower is a gallows-like pole from which various ropes, weighted at the base, hang. A small hand-grip allows the patients to lift and lower the weights, and the device is designed to strengthen arm muscles in those paraplegics who have the use of their arms.

A patient could easily be hung from the device, if he had no leg muscles at all. Lakewood had no muscle control below the breastbone.

As the picture of the helpless youth sank in, I couldn't help but shudder.

"I guess the cops'll be back tomorrow," Marks was saying. I lit a cigarette.

"But who the hell would want to kill Bill," I wondered aloud. "Such a happy guy."

Marks just shrugged. "They don't even know how he got out of bed. None of the orderlies on duty took him out. So they said."

And that was it. I mean at first. There was no other information available and I went home from Rancho more than a little worried after speaking with my other therapy patients.

Marks assured me that he was in no danger. In the first place, the police had posted a guard, the staff had been alerted and were doubly watchful, and it looked all set for a quiet night.

The other two men in Marks' room, Junior Donnely and Mike Bornstein, were around, so Marks wouldn't be exactly alone.

Nothing much did happen Sunday night, except that Lakewood's bedding disappeared. Not just the sheets and pillow cases and blankets, but the pillows, too.

It had to have happened sometime between ten and midnight. Every two hours the patients are turned so that bed sores won't develop, and when the ten o'clock turning was done the bedding was there. When the orderlies made the rounds at midnight it was gone.

Marks, Bornstein and Donnely had all been asleep, and had seen and heard nothing.

The hospital director, Phil Stuelpman, was half fluttery when I came in to work the next morning, my vacation over. The whole staff was upset. Only the patients seemed to be enjoying the excitement. This was as good as the earthquake which had

shaken Los Angeles the previous February.

Stuelpman was asking everybody if they had removed the bedding, but of course they hadn't. No one knew anything about it, and Stuelpman was getting more and more upset.

The police were puzzled and a little angry too. Marks came in for another round of questioning and had to miss his therapy, except for the range-of-motion exercises which are done in bed. Range-of-motion is the simplest exercise, designed to keep the joints from stiffening and keep them flexible.

I knew Marks would be worried and upset over missing the more important exercises, the power building, the lessons in transferring from chair to bed or other position, and so forth. So I made it a point to drop in on him before I went home Monday evening. I found him alone in the hospital coffee shop. He looked a bit flushed with excitement and anxiety.

"I don't want to lose any of the ground I've gained," he told me. "Every day away from therapy loses two days of progress. It's too easy for these muscles to give up anyway, without giving them an excuse to lay around." But it was the murder he wanted to discuss.

We went over all the theories that were making the rounds of the hospital. But he didn't have

any idea why anyone would have removed the bedding.

Maybe the orderlies had removed it when they turned the patients at ten. Marks looked at me with a sarcastic frown. "Not hardly, Dennis Lieberman. They'd have said so. Why lie about so simple a matter?"

"Maybe they were scared by the fuzz."

Marks laughed outright at this. "Those guys? Or even the nurses? Listen, they have more cool than an ice cube in Alaska. They wouldn't be afraid of the cops. When the Governor was here, Magpie, little old Pill Pusher Magpie, had her say to him!"

Magpie is, despite the nickname the patients have given her, a very quiet woman of about fifty. I'd heard of the time she raked the Governor for cutting the hospital budgets statewide.

"So maybe it was one of the

civilian staff, huh?" I put forward.

Marks shook his head negatively. "They keep them pretty busy around here. I can't see one of them making a special trip just to straighten up a bed which has been messed up all day anyway. Besides, the cops hadn't wanted anyone to touch anything of Bill's until they finished with it this morning."

About that time, Junior Donnely wheeled over. Donnely is in an odd position. He has the use of his arms, but not of his hands. He can push his wheel chair around pretty easily and prefers to do the pushing to operating an electric chair. The kid has an independant mind, and the hospital expects great things from him before they finish his therapy.

"The pigs giving you much problem, Chuck," he asked. Donnely has an idiom all his own, which his parents neither understand nor know the origin of.

"Not too much, Junior."

"Tell you anything?"

"Nope." Marks makes it a habit not to say too much to Donnely. I felt a little sorry for Donnely. All he wanted was something to talk about.

"Bill say anything to you before he. .got it? I mean, anything odd?"

"Not a word, Junior. You know Bill. Everything he said was odd. Nobody paid much attention to him."

I watched as Donnely wheeled over to the counter and ordered a coke. The girl sat the coke on the tray in front of him, and took ten cents from Junior's change wallet.

"He's been nosing around me all day," Marks whispered with a grin on his face. "But I just play it cool."

Coming back to the table, I noticed that Donnely's chair had developed a slight squeek in the left wheel. "Yeah," he told me, "Can't get those S.O.B.'s to fix it, either. I've been after them for a week now. The money my folks pay, you'd think they could afford to grease my wheel."

He stared down at the offending part with a look of disgust, thumping its rim with his claw-like fingers. He lifted his hand then, and using both stiff members, made his hands squeeze the coke cup between them, so that he could hike the straw to his lips. He took a long sip, and then gently and shakily sat the cup back down.

"That's good," he said. "So, they haven't told you anything," he looked Marks directly in the eyes.

"Not a word. They only ask questions, they don't answer them."

"Mike says that they asked him if you ever went for late rides in your chair." He was still looking at Marks' face.

"Wha'd Mike say?"

"Oh, just that you were an early to bed early to rise kind of guy. You think they suspect you?"

"They haven't said so."

"Oh. Mike said he sort of thought they did, the way they asked about your night riding habits." Marks and I laughed at that, and Donnely joined in after realizing what he'd sounded like.

"I don't think," Marks said, relenting a little, "that the police really know who they ought to suspect. When you look at it, who's capable of rigging up such a set up? Has to be a staff member, if it's anybody here. Nobody else is that strong."

Donnely looked at Marks oddly. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Would have to be a staff member. Who else could it be?" He was thoughtful for a minute. Abruptly, then, he turned his chair around. "I've got to get back to the room," he muttered over his shoulder. "My folks might come down tonight."

We didn't talk much any more that night, since the big news was three-quarters mystery, and we'd already discussed what we knew. I walked alongside Marks as he went back to his room, and waited while the orderlies put him to bed. Magpie, who finished her shift at midnight, was in the room, and she asked Marks if he wanted a sleeping pill.

"Doc said you could have a sleeper if you wanted it," she said. "Thought you might, 'cause of all the excitement."

Marks seriously considered it, and I was surprised, as Marks is a matter of fact sort of guy, who doesn't speculate or worry much. But he turned it down, grinning, and after Magpie and the orderlies left, he told me why.

"Man, I plan to be wide awake and alert tonight, and every night, till this thing is over." He made it sound like a joke, but I knew it was only half joking.

I wouldn't have wanted to sleep too soundly either. I smoked a cigarette and we talked a little longer, and then the call came for visitors to leave. I walked out the door, and was startled to see Donnely parked there.

"Everything ok?" he inquired.

"Yeah, I guess so," I said.

"Well, I better get to bed," Donnely started scooting down the hall, his chair squeeking softly in the empty, dim lit hall. I watched him thoughtfully. The kid could get some speed going on that chair.

I went home, feeling a mixture of apprehension and disbelief. This just couldn't be happening. But I knew it was.

THE NEXT MORNING, I brought the morning paper, with its brief, back page article on the events of

the last two days. Marks was in the solarium having breakfast when I got there, but he waved me into the room. Donnely was across from him, and Mike Bornstein was at the next table. They nodded briefly, acknowledging my presence, but little else.

"So what's up," I asked.

Marks took a bite of scrambled eggs. "I'm being moved," he said briefly. "To a room by myself."

"It's only for awhile," Donnely broke in, almost defensively. "It's Ward 700. They don't have a spare bed in any room, so he has to be in a room by himself. But he'll have a room mate soon. They expect one in tomorrow. Another patient."

"But how come you're being moved," I wanted to know.

Marks looked at Donnely and Bornstein. They were busy, very obviously eating and not listening. "*They* wanted me out. We had a little excitement last night, and they told Stuelpman it was either them or me. So I volunteered."

"What happened last night?"

"There was somebody in the room who shouldn't have been. And the last Mike saw of him, he was on my side of the bed in my chair. Then he either got into my bed or disappeared into thin air."

"Well?"

"Well, I was in the rec room playing records when Mike saw the guy. Only I was by myself."

"You were in bed when I left," I said, almost making a question out of it.

"Yeah, but I had the orderlies put me back in my chair. I couldn't sleep, and I went down to play some records. I should have taken Magpie's sleeper."

"But is that all?" I asked. It still sounded simple and nonviolent to me. Maybe Bornstein had just seen Marks make the transfer and had thought something odd about it.

"Nope," Donnely chimed in. "The cord was cut."

"The cord?"

"What you call for help with," Marks clarified. "As you know, we each have a button connected with a buzzer at the nurses station. When Mike saw. . .the man. . .he rang for a nurse. And nobody came till I got back into the room. The cord had been cut."

"So Chuck has to move out, and the pigs are putting a watch on him."

"Well, good. Maybe now you can be cleared of suspicion." I said, hoping to lighten the situation.

"Yeah, providing something happens while I'm under guard. Of course, if nothing happens from here on out, I guess I'm in trouble."

Yes, I guess he would have been.

"Say," Marks went on, looking

at me conspiratorially, "you remember what I told you about Bill's pillows?"

That they were missing. "Yes," I said. Donnely's ears perked.

"I may have some more news for you later tonight. Can you stick around to come back?"

"I'd planned to stick around," I said.

"Good," Marks replied, nodding his head. "I've got to go to do some therapy now," he told me, excusing himself. "Got some make-up work to get done."

Donnely and I watched him disappear out into the hall.

"What did he tell you," Donnely asked. "I mean, about Bill's pillows."

"Nothing," I said truthfully. "I think he was putting you on. You know Chuck."

"Yeah," Donnely muttered. Silence, and then, "I don't think Chuck ever just put any body on. What did he tell you?"

"Nothing," I insisted. "Absolutely nothing."

Donnely gave me an odd look, and squeeked off towards the physical therapy room.

I didn't get to stick around after all. Administration called me away, and I left a note for Marks at the nurses' station. I meant to come back that night, but wasn't able to. I called instead, but Marks was in bed, and his new room didn't have a phone yet.

"He's fine," the nurse, a Miss Halstead, whom I didn't know, assured me. "He took a sleeper, and by now he's forty leagues into sleep." She laughed inanely. Hospital humour is just plain beyond me.

The police filled me in on the rest of Marks' night the next afternoon.

Marks had over worked himself a bit, and had asked to be put to bed right after dinner. Magpie had taken him his pills at ten, and he'd asked for a sleeper then.

Apparently, the excitement combined with the over-exertion counteracted the sleeper, which was only a mild one to begin with, because Marks would start to drift off to sleep and be awakened by a soreness in his shoulders, or by the suddenly quiet night—he wasn't used to sleeping alone any more.

He was still awake at midnight and at two when he was turned and pilled, but he hadn't wanted any more sleeping tablets. Then, after the two o'clock turn, he heard the door open. Thinking it was another nurse, and that maybe he had slept after all, he laid there quietly.

The first thing that he noticed that was wrong was that no light entered the room from the hallway. He'd have sat up, if he could have. As it was he turned his head to face the doorway a little more.

All he could see was a figure in a wheel chair. The light from the window behind Marks prevented him from seeing any further details. Moonlight is a far cry from that continuous broad daylight of a hospital, or from that cold evening twilight of luminescence that they keep going all night.

He started to ask who was there, when he heard the chair begin moving forward. He blinked his eyes in a double take, not really believing that someone was coming into his room.

The chair was wheeled to the foot of Marks' bed, and he lay still, half-scared, half wondering what was happening. Whoever it was fiddled with the knob at the foot of the bed, and finally managed to turn it, so that the electric motor hummed and the bed itself was lowered.

Then the intruder wheeled himself behind Marks and to the head of the bed, where Marks heard the small pulley put there for his morning pull ups being tampered with.

It wasn't until he felt the hand fumbling with the pull bar next to his ear that he started to speak. All he could manage to say was "What. . ." when he felt the pull bar slip under his chin from behind. And then he felt the cold, fleshy touch of a palm at the base of his neck.

"Chuck," a voice whispered. Marks didn't—he couldn't—answer. "Chuck," the voice went on, "I'm sorry."

So was Marks. He felt the pull bar slip down against his throat, and then felt the rope brushing through his hair. He knew that the intruder was making the pull bar into a noose—a noose like the one that had hoisted Lakewood just high enough to strangle him.

Marks knew he couldn't do anything about it, because he couldn't lift his arms over his head or even turn around yet. He hadn't gotten that far in therapy.

When the rope was well behind him, Marks felt the pull bar being pulled closer to his adam's apple, until it was snug against it, the rope against the back of his neck. "One by one," the whisperer said.

Marks felt the rope tighten as a shuffling sound filled the void behind him. The intruder had weights on his lap or at least within reach, and was adding them to the hook at the other end of the pull rope. With each weight added, Marks' neck was slowly being lifted. Slowly, and curiously gently.

"One at a time. One at a time," the whispering continued. The rope was too tight now for Marks to speak at all, though he wanted to. He wanted to yell.

A gurgling must have escaped his throat, because for an instant, the shuffling and voice stopped, and the next weight

wasn't added. And then a sigh.

"Really sorry, chuck old boy," the whisperer said, and another ten pound weight was added.

Marks tried to grab for the rope, but his hands couldn't focus around the thing, and his fingers kept slipping. "Really sorry." More shuffling.

That's when the lights in the hall and in the room came on, and the cops walked in.

The intruder was Donnely, and as the story was sifted out later, the kid had plenty of motive for all he'd done.

In the first place, the police told Marks, Junior Donnely had been on dope for some time. Lakewood had stumbled on to his secret, and Donnely had planned to kill him for some time. Donnely's hands had caused a problem, but less so than anyone would have thought.

It wasn't that he couldn't use his hands—he just hadn't wanted to. He'd been going to the Physical Therapy room for some time building up their strength when no one was there, but for some twisted reason, had kept their recovery, the fact of it, to himself.

When Lakewood caught some of Donnely's buddies bringing in a little LSD, Lakewood had tried to cut himself in on it. . . . .and Donnely had found it easy to lure Lakewood to the therapy room. How had Donnely gotten him from the bed into the chair? He hadn't. His friends had. Then they cut out, after the murder.

The next night, Donnely had tried to search Lakewood's bedding, because Lakewood had told him he had left evidence behind—a sad little safeguard that hadn't worked. And of course the intruder that night that Mike had seen, was Donnely, who simply ducked, in his chair, behind Marks' bed. He'd meant to kill Marks then, but had been surprised to find him gone so late at night.

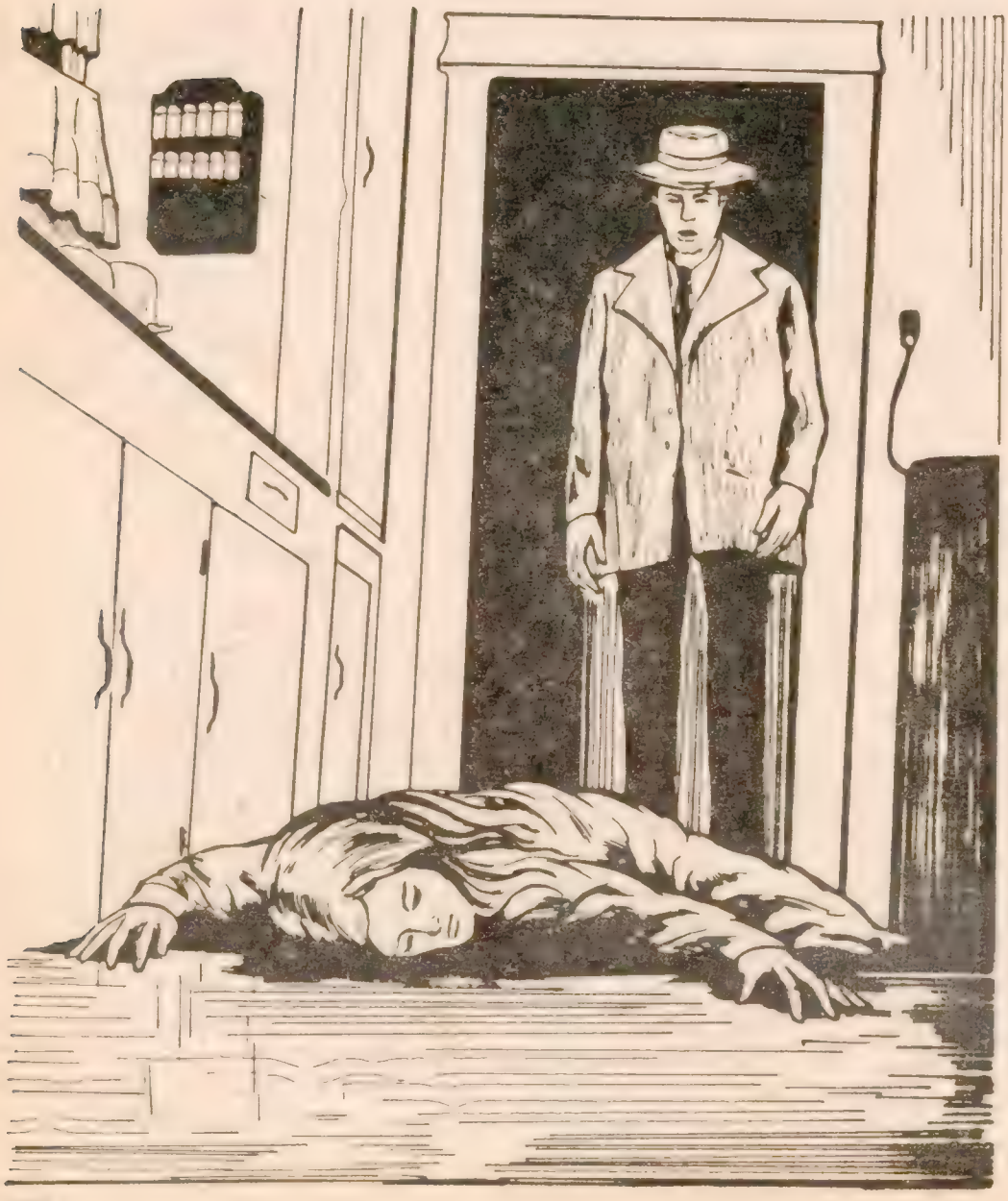
Oh, it was all very simple, of course. Donnely had been worried that Marks knew more than he was saying, and that he might drop a hint about it to me.

"But what I don't understand," Marks said, shaking his head, "is why he'd do something like that if he was making such a recovery! Hell, I know twenty guys who would have been mighty glad to get their hands back. It means a lot, and Junior could have made something of himself when he got out. Could have, really been rehabilitated. If he could have stayed away from the dope. Well, you never know." Marks said as I wheeled him down the hall for his power building exercises. "Some guys need a different rehab program. Can't solve all their problems."

He looked up at me then with a weird smile on his face. "I'm glad I'm only paraplegic," he said.

Murderer's Pick

by THEODORE MATHIESON



All men walked with Hate that night. And every woman lived with Terror. When a witch's cauldron seethes with that kind of Devil's brew, there can issue but one kind of potion—sudden death, and very soon . . .

IN A CRISP March morning in 1968, Sheriff Pike was called to the O'Leary farm on the outskirts of Tumalo, a few miles from Bend, Oregon. In the kitchen of the modern, ranch-style farm house, Pike found Mrs. O'Leary, a young attractive brunette, lying dead in a pool of blood in front of the sink. She'd been stabbed several times in the back with a thin, pointed instrument, apparently while washing some breakfast dishes, and had died, Sheriff Pike judged, almost instantaneously. She was naked beneath her flimsy housecoat, but there was no sign of struggle or attack, nor any trace of the weapon that had killed her.

According to her husband, Bert, who had telephoned the sheriff, he and his wife had had breakfast at five-thirty that morning—the O'Learys were childless, and there was no one else in the house. Around seven, O'Leary had taken his truck and gone into Redmond to fetch some rolls of barbed wire that he'd ordered from a mailing house. The trip and business in town had taken him three hours, and he'd returned at around ten, to find his wife dead.

The time of the murder, according to the autopsy report, was set at least three hours before Sheriff Pike arrived, which meant she'd been killed around seven-thirty that morning, or shortly after her husband said he'd left for Redmond.

"Can you think of anyone who might have done this?" Sheriff Pike asked O'Leary on that first visit. The farmer was a wiry, black haired man with eyes that had difficulty in meeting the sheriff's.

"Winnie didn't have any enemies that I know of," he said. "Some tramp might have come here and asked for a bite. Winnie was a soft touch."

"Not many tramps in these parts any more," the sheriff said. "The county vagrancy laws have discouraged 'em."

"Then I wouldn't know."

Something about O'Leary's cool, detached reaction to his wife's death drove the sheriff to ask careful questions of neighboring farmer folk. At the same time he set his deputies to searching the area near the O'Leary farm for the missing weapon.

He soon found that all was not well with the O'Leary marriage. Mrs. O'Leary had been the daughter of a tavern owner in the nearby town of Sisters, who'd married O'Leary five years before, after Bert's first wife had been killed in an automobile accident.

She'd hated farm life from the first, and her desire to frequent bars and taverns was the cause of much marital quarreling as well as physical violence. Winnie had been seen with a black eye on at least two occasions, and once with a broken arm!

Forty-eight hours after the murder, Sheriff Pike paid another visit to the O'Leary farm. He found O'Leary setting sprinklers in his alfalfa field.

"Come sit in my car with me, O'Leary," the sheriff said. "I've a few more questions to ask, if you don't mind."

The farmer looked disgruntled and reluctant, but he went along.

"I've been looking into your time schedule on the morning your wife was killed," the sheriff said. "The trip to Redmond from your farm requires only a half hour, and you say you left at seven-thirty. But I've checked with the Railway Express in Redmond, and they say you did not come in to pick up the wire until nine-thirty. Do you mind telling me what you were doing during those two hours?"

"I just drove around, I guess," O'Leary said. "Well, you might as well know. Winnie and I hadn't been getting along too good, and before I left we quarrelled."

"What about?"

"There was a guy she'd met in Bend last weekend. Some cowboy drifter. We were in this tavern, and they got pretty chummy, and I didn't like it. That's what we were arguing about that morning. It didn't mean anything."

"And yet after that unimportant quarrel you went out and drove around for a couple of hours?"

"Yeah That's what I did."

"And you wouldn't think of harming your wife."

"No, I wouldn't."

"What about those black eyes she got, and that broken arm?"

"I didn't do nothing to her, I swear!"

"Unfortunately I don't be-

lieve you. Among your wife's recipes, in the kitchen closet, I found a two-month-old statement from a Doctor Ryan in Bend. When I checked with him, he told me that your wife came to him with a fractured arm bone, and said that you had broken it deliberately; that you often beat her because she complained about living on the farm."

"That's a lie! I never broke her arm. Maybe I roughed her up a little now and then, but she deserved it. Winnie was pretty hard to live with!"

ON THAT afternoon, Thursday, one of the sheriff's deputies found the missing weapon, an ice pick still bearing blood stains, buried in the small flower garden in back of the O'Leary house.

Pike then took the farmer into custody, and breathed a sigh of relief. But too soon. At eleven o'clock that night the sheriff was awakened from his sleep by another telephone call.

A second farm wife had been stabbed to death.

This time the victim was Janet Blevins, thirty-two, also attractive, and the mother of two young daughters. Oscar Blevins, her husband, was a big cattle rancher, his spread running to over a thousand acres at the foot of the eastern Cascades, which he operated with the help of a younger brother, Steve.

Mrs. Blevins, unlike Mrs. O'Leary, was a well-educated woman, a good manager, not only of the household, but of the ranch exchequer, and a devoted mother as well.

She had been returning from an evening of the PTA at the local grammar school, when she had been stabbed several times in the back, in the darkness of her garage, as she was getting out of the car.

Once again the victim had been attacked with a long, pointed instrument, and once again the weapon was missing.

Otherwise the circumstances surrounding her death were very different. Oscar Blevins, who usually attended the PTA meetings with his wife, had decided to stay at home that night because he'd felt the onset of a bad cold, and had let his wife go alone. He was known to be a sober, solid man of unassailable morals, devoted to his wife and daughters.

"I cannot imagine who would do this terrible thing," he said on the morning following the murder. He sat in a rocking chair in a plainly furnished parlor that had an elk's head hanging over the fireplace. "Janet was a fine woman. She didn't deserve to

die. If I ever find the person—"

He turned away, unable to speak further.

His younger brother Steve spoke up then. Quite a different speciman from his brother, the sheriff opined, tense and talkative, although with the kind of dark good looks that many women would find attractive.

"Come here, Sheriff," Steve said, drawing the officer into another room. "I don't want Oscar to hear what I've got to say. But this here murder is exactly like the one up at O'Leary's place, isn't it?"

"There are similarities," the sheriff said guardedly.

"Well, I have an idea I know what's happened. I don't think O'Leary murdered his wife. I believe Janet and Mrs. O'Leary were killed by the same person."

"And who would that be?"

"Amos Blount. He's got a farm, or rather what's left of a farm, up the road about two miles."

"Why should Blount want to murder these two women?"

"I think he's a fanatic. A month ago, his farm house caught fire. Now there's no fire protection out here normally; we take our chances with our own make-shift preventions, but Blount had made some arrangement with a guy who'd bought up one of those out-moded, hand-pump fire trucks and had it standing ready to meet an emergency."

"It sounds like a good idea."

"Totally inadequate. We prefer to rely on ourselves here."

"You say Blount's farmhouse caught fire."

"That's right. He tried to get in touch with Olson—that's the guy who owns the fire truck—but some woman was on the party line and wouldn't get off. He begged her to let him put his call through, but she wouldn't, and in the time that he was trying to reach Olson, his farmhouse burned to the ground, and one of his children with it."

"I can't believe," the sheriff said, "that any farm woman would not let a call for help go through."

"That's because Blount or his wife often cried wolf, to get a clear line. She must not have believed him."

"Who was it?"

"Nobody seems to know. None of the women on the line will admit to being the one. I guess that's natural. And Blount threatened in front of witnesses that either the guilty woman would speak up, or he would kill all the women on the party line!"

"Who were the witnesses?"

"I was one. I was mending fences up Blount's way about a week ago, and I heard him shouting at someone—a lawyer, I think—that he called in to see if he could bring suit against anybody."

"Was Mrs. Blevins, your sister-in-law, on this party line?"

"Yes. And three others, including Mrs. O'Leary, the Blounts, of course, and one other. I don't know who it is."

"Thanks, Mr. Blevins," the sheriff said.

AMOS BLOUNT had moved his family—a wife and six children—into the barn after the fire, and when Sheriff Pike drove up, Blount was busy reshingling the roof.

"It's only March and we're bound to have some more snow before good weather comes," Blount said as he came down the ladder to greet the sheriff. He was a lean, weather-beaten looking man with bright blue eyes that he now fixed on Pike with disconcerting directness.

"I'm investigating two murders in this neighborhood, Mr. Blount," the sheriff said. "Of Mrs. O'Leary three days ago, and of Mrs. Blevins last night. I'd appreciate your answering a few questions."

"Mrs. Blevins!" the farmer repeated and sat down on the stump of a ponderosa. "And the O'Leary woman. Well, it's God's will for what one of them did to me and my family. I begged them to let me call Olson and his fire truck!" He looked at the sheriff.

"What I'm chiefly interested in, Mr. Blount, is a threat which you made about killing these women."

"A threat?"

"Made, I understand, in the presence of a lawyer."

"Did Mr. Bledsoe tell you that! He had no right! I simply called him out here to see if I could bring suit against the one who kept me from getting help."

"What did Mr. Bledsoe tell you?"

"That I would have to have proof who did it. I lost my temper then, and said things. Look, I've had a hard time since I brought my family out from Nebraska. We've scarcely had enough to eat at times. But I'm a God-fearing man, I do my work, and this year, for the first time God smiled at us. Then—the fire! I lost my youngest, too. No wonder I said things. Mr. Bledsoe had no right to repeat them!"

"He didn't."

"But who did? Nobody else was here, except my wife. The kids were at school." He turned suddenly and bawled towards

the barn until his face grew red. "Etta. *Etta!*"

The barn door opened and a work-worn little woman in a faded blue gingham dress stepped into the yard.

"Yes, Amos?"

"Did you tell anybody what I said about those telephone women!" he demanded in a tone that made his wife cringe.

"Your wife didn't tell anyone, Blount," the sheriff said. "Someone else happened to be around and overheard it."

"Blevins, that's who it was! Steve Blevins!" Blount made a savage gesture at his wife and she disappeared back into the barn.

"Why Blevins?" the sheriff asked.

"He always finds a job to do up this way, but I know the reason. He's after Melanie!"

"Melanie?"

"My daughter. She's sixteen now, and the boys are starting to get after her. I told Blevins that I'd shoot him if he so much as set foot on my property!"

"Why should you object to Steve Blevins?" the sheriff asked. "He's not just a hired hand."

"Oh, I know he gives himself the airs of landed gentry, but he ain't no pardner of Oscar's, I'll tell you that. You ask him. Oscar might be his brother, but he pays Steve a weekly wage like any other drifter, and for a good reason, if you ask me. He's no good. The Devil is in him!"

"I guess the Devil is in all of us, Mr. Blount."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just that I think you've thrown up enough of a dust cloud for now. Please tell me where you were and what you were doing on the morning of March twenty-sixth, last Tuesday."

"Last Tuesday?"

"The morning Winifred O'Leary was murdered."

So far as opportunity mattered, Amos Blount could have committed both murders. An early riser, on the day Mrs. O'Leary had been killed, Blount was already at work cleaning out a cistern by five o'clock, and his wife hadn't seen him again until noon. On the previous night, at the very time Mrs. Blevins was murdered, the Nebraskan had been riding his favorite stallion in the woods.

At the same time, Sheriff Pike did not neglect looking into Blount's accusations against Steve Blevins.

"My brother Steve is a changed man since he's come to work for me," Oscar Blevins told the sheriff as they sat together on the terrace of his

home. "He was always a lady's man, but I will not have anything like that going on around my home and my children, and he knows it.

"That O'Leary woman now, I hate to say it, but she only got what was coming to her. I don't believe her husband killed her, Sheriff. It was some jealous lover who murdered her after O'Leary left that morning. She was notorious for having affairs with anybody. That's why poor O'Leary couldn't keep a hired man living on the place."

"Just for the record, Mr. Blevins," the sheriff said, "do you know where your brother was on the morning Mrs. O'Leary was murdered?"

"I happen to remember exactly. We were together in Portland at a saddle auction. We left on the twenty-fifth, that was Monday. Mrs. O'Leary was killed on Tuesday, and we didn't get back until the afternoon of the twenty-seventh, on Wednesday. And Steve was with me every moment!"

"And who do you think killed Mrs. Blevins?" the sheriff asked.

Oscar gave a little gasp, and put his hand over his face.

"I've been talking to forget about Janny," he said. "Steve told me about Blount's threat after you left this morning. I

felt like going up to his place and choking the truth out of him. But I don't know. It's inconceivable that a man like Blount could kill an innocent woman out of pure vengeance."

"One of his children died in the fire," the sheriff said.

"I guess that's what stopped me from going up there," Blevins said.

SHERIFF PIKE went next to see the fourth person on the party line, Mrs. Paul Driver, an elderly widow who had her farm up for sale.

"I'm not happy here now, since my husband died," she told the sheriff as they sat in her prim little parlor. "I'm packing up little by little, and shall soon go back to Maryland, where what relatives I've got left are living. You mentioned something about these dreadful

murders, Sheriff, but I can't imagine why you came to me!"

"You look like a sensible, straightforward woman," Pike said. "I'm sure it couldn't have been you who refused to let Amos Blount get his call through to the fire truck."

"Good heavens, no! I wouldn't dream of it, and besides I have very few friends and rarely use the phone except to place my grocery order with the Tumalo store. I pay them to deliver."

"Do you have a gun in the house, Mrs. Driver?"

"My husband's .48. It still hangs by his bed with the cartridge belt, fully loaded. It was a habit from his cowpoke days."

"Well, you live alone here, so please be careful until these murders are cleared up. Keep your door locked, and your gun close by. I hope you know how to use it."

"My husband taught me, and I shall be careful, Sheriff, although I can't imagine why I should!"

On Saturday morning Pike got a phone call from Bert O'Leary's lawyer demanding that his client be released for lack of sufficient evidence. An examination of the ice pick found in the O'Leary flower garden had revealed no fingerprints, although it had been determined that the blood was human.

But the lawyer's main contention was that Mrs. O'Leary's death was clearly linked with Janet Blevins, and was a double murder, committed by the same person or persons unknown. Bert O'Leary couldn't possibly have committed the second murder, since he was in custody at the time; ergo, he was guiltless of the first.

"You ought to know it's out of my hands," Pike told the lawyer. "Go talk to the D.A."

Then the sheriff went down into the tank to see O'Leary.

"Did your wife ever tell you about a telephone conversation she had with a man called Amos Blount?"

"The one whose place burned down? Yes, she did. Winnie wouldn't let him call the fire truck because she thought he was fooling. When she learned of her mistake, she was sorry, but afraid to admit she was the guilty party. She made me promise not to tell, but I don't suppose it matters now."

"Why was it, O'Leary, that you never kept a hired man on your farm?"

O'Leary dropped his eyes. "You must have heard by now, Sheriff. Winnie wasn't the straightest wife a man ever had."

"Was there someone besides

you in her life at the time she was killed?"

"I—don't know. But don't you see, Sheriff, if I was going to murder my wife for *that*, I would have done it a long time ago!"

Pike was taking a nap on the couch in his office that afternoon when his deputy Tom Stark knocked on the door.

"Well, Stark, what did you find in Portland?" the sheriff asked.

"It's just as Oscar said. Steve and he were together at the auction for three days. I especially checked the morning of the 26th. At seven-thirty, they were both having breakfast with five other cattlemen. I checked with each of them by phone."

"Well, that seems to be that," Pike said.

"So, what's our next move?"

"I wish I knew."

THE ANSWER came inside two hours when Pike's phone rang. It was from the proprietor of the Tumalo Grocery Store, Joe Potts, and his news sent Sheriff Pike and Stark burning rubber out of town.

The front door of the Driver house stood open, the *FOR SALE* sign in its glass window awry, as if someone had used force on the door, although there was no other sign of a break visible in it.

On the porch sat the box of groceries the delivery boy from the Tumalo grocery had left. He, too, had found the door open, and called to Mrs. Driver, who always tipped him for his service. When he received no answer, he looked into one of the porch windows, the shades of which were wide open. What he saw sent him streaking back to his boss, who'd called the sheriff.

Now Pike and Stark found Mrs. Driver lying dead in her parlor on a blood-soaked ruglet in front of the fireplace. She'd been stabbed just like the others, the only difference being that the ice pick had been left in her back. Her body was still warm.

"My guess is she's been dead less than two hours," the sheriff said. "Definitely killed after twelve o'clock."

In the kitchen Pike found two cups of coffee, drunk to the dregs, sitting at opposite ends of the table.

"And that accounts for her letting him in," the sheriff said. "He was somebody she knew, well enough to offer a cup of coffee to. It's my guess that she took him afterwards into the living room to show him something, perhaps it was in that box on the mantel piece,

and while her back was turned. . ."

"Look, Sheriff," Stark said, pointing at a rack above the sink. "The handles of the knives and spatula hanging there are blue, just like the ice pick's. The pick was her own. What's the matter, Sheriff?"

"You stay here, Stark, and phone for the Doc. I've got a job that can't wait."

"What job?"

"Picking up a killer."

The Blount farmhouse, or the remains of it, was only ten minutes away, and the sheriff was there instanter.

Three of the Blount children, two girls and a boy, were playing with toy trucks in front of the barn, which reminded Pike it was Saturday. The boy informed him that his papa wasn't home.

"Do you know where he is?" Pike asked.

"He said he was going over to Mr. Blevins'. He took the truck."

"When did he leave?"

"This morning."

"And your mother?"

"She went with him, and so did Melanie. We're hungry, we want to eat!"

Pike saw Blount's battered blue truck parked in the driveway as he drove up to the Blevins ranch. Blount himself was sitting stiffly on a bench on the terrace, his face as set as petrified wood, while his wife, beside him, looked mutely miserable. A honey-haired, blond girl in blue jeans and blue work shirt waved at the sheriff as if he were a welcome relief from boredom.

"Mr. Blount, how long have you been here?" Pike asked.

"Since eleven-thirty this morning."

"We should go home, Amos," Mrs. Blount urged feebly. "The children will be hungry."

"I'm starved," the girl said.

"Shut up, Melanie. I won't leave until this matter is cleared up!"

"What matter is that?" the sheriff asked.

"Steve Blevins has been fooling around our Melanie again, just last night, and I came here to have a showdown."

"Oh, papa, it wasn't all that bad!" Melanie said.

"Shut up. Oscar Blount has gone to find Steve—he's out riding—have him speak for himself. He wouldn't take my word!"

"Mr. Blevins has been gone for hours," Mrs. Blount complained. "He was angry."

At this point the door opened and an elderly woman with white hair came out on the terrace.

"Please keep your voices

down," she said. "I've just got the poor little ones to sleep upstairs. Sheriff Pike, I've heard of you. I'm Grace Cresswell, from Tumalo. I've come in to take care of the children in this terrible time."

"Mrs. Cresswell," the sheriff asked, tight-lipped, "Have the Blounts been on this terrace from, say, twelve o'clock on?"

"Oh, long before that!"

Pike lit a cigarette and walking to the far end of the terrace stood cursing quietly. Obviously this was a series of murders, committed by the same person, or it wouldn't make sense! Amos Blount had both the motive and the opportunity that made him the logical suspect for the first two murders.

But Blount couldn't have killed Mrs. Driver.

Steve Blevins? He could not have murdered Winifred O'Leary.

And Bert O'Leary couldn't have killed either Mrs. Blevins or Mrs. Driver!

In a fever of indecision, realizing he had to do something, Sheriff Pike returned to the others.

"Mrs. Cresswell," he said, "I'd like to look at Steve's bedroom. Will you please show me where it is?"

"Well, certainly — I'm sure it'll be all right."

The woman led Pike inside and through a long hall to the back of the house.

"The room on the left is Mr. Oscar Blevins' and the one on the right is Steve's," she said and went away.

Pike glanced into Oscar's room. It was devoid of any masculine imprint; the curtains were fluffy and white, the bedspread pink, and the furniture was fragile, all clearly reflecting the taste of Janet Blevins. It was hard to imagine the big-fisted, hard-riding Oscar at home in such a room.

Steve's bedroom was something else. Bare of curtains, it was littered with everything else one could imagine—cameras, guns, picture frames, piles of western magazines, boxes of rocks, buttons, pins, rolls of string wound up into tight balls. It looked as if Steve never threw anything away.

The sheriff sighed, and returned to the terrace, just in time to see Steve and Oscar riding a couple of stallions up the driveway.

THE NEXT half hour was a painful one on the Blevins' terrace, filled with accusations and anger. While Steve denied having had any serious dalliance with Melanie, and Melanie backed him up, Oscar Blevins grew hot and cold by turns.

"I've made it perfectly

clear," Oscar said to Steve at one point, "that you'd be asked to leave this ranch if there was any trouble like this. I said if you behaved yourself, the ranch could well be yours one day, at least a partnership."

"And I've been trying to tell you, Oscar," Steve pleaded like a little boy, "that nothing has happened between Melanie and me."

"That's right!" Melanie agreed. "When Steve came up our way, we'd just talk. I used to like him a lot!"

"Used to like him!" Amos Blount sneered. "Last night I caught you two in the junipers, and you were hugging him!" He snorted in disgust.

"I was not! He was trying to make up to me, and I was trying to stop him. I had my reasons. I told Mrs. Blevins why, when she came to see me."

"Mrs. Blevins?" Oscar asked. "What did my wife have to do with this?"

"She came out to the high school about a week ago, just to talk to me. She said that people might begin to talk about Steve and me, and that I would put him into trouble with you if I kept on seeing him."

"You never told me that!" Steve cried.

"She asked me not to, but I wouldn't have anyway. I knew you weren't really interested in me."

"Who was he interested in!" Oscar demanded.

Sheriff Pike, sitting quietly on the terrace railing, fingered his revolver as Steve took a step towards Melanie.

"You've said enough, you brat!"

"Don't you call my daughter that!" Amos Blount said.

"Who was my brother interested in," Oscar asked again.

Melanie looked sullenly at Steve. "Oh, I knew what was going on! I used to see you going by early in the morning, or at night; up the road towards Mrs. O'Leary's!"

There was a silence, which Sheriff Pike broke by asking quietly: "Melanie, when Mrs. Blevins visited you at the school, did you tell her about Mrs. O'Leary and Steve?"

"Yes, I did."

"Now look here—" Steve began. His voice sounded hollow.

Sheriff Pike pointed towards the stallion which Steve had been riding, which was now tied to a rail beyond the terrace pawing the ground.

"You said you went riding this afternoon, but you didn't say where. Did you, by any chance, stop at Mrs. Driver's place?"

"Why would I stop there?" Steve asked.

"I don't know. Mrs. Driver was murdered, just as Mrs. Blevins was, and Mrs. O'Leary."

Oscar Blevins sank into a chair as if his legs had given out from under him.

"What are you trying to say?" Steve's voice was almost a whisper.

"I noticed you carried a saddlebag, Steve," the sheriff replied. "Would you mind if I looked inside it?"

"You say out of there. It's my property!"

But Pike was already moving towards the horse, and as he reached it, Steve began running towards him. The sight of the revolver in Pike's hand stopped him cold.

A moment later the sheriff had pulled an object from the saddlebag and held it up for all to see.

It was an ice pick.

"Call it a hunch, based on what I'd heard on that terrace," the sheriff said later to Stark at the courthouse, after he'd booked Steve Blevins for his self-confessed murders.

"I figured he certainly went to Mrs. Driver's place to kill her, so he must have taken a weapon—the same one, as it will probably prove, that he'd killed his sister-in-law with. It was on impulse that he used Mrs.

Driver's own ice pick to do the job, so I reasoned he must still have the original one."

"I don't follow," Stark said.

"If you'd seen Steve's room, you'd have known he is the kind who never throws anything away. So when I saw that saddlebag. . ."

"Was Oscar Blevins' wife in love with Steve?"

"I don't think so. According to Steve's story, she was really trying to save him from trouble. When she heard about the O'Leary murder, she already knew of Steve's involvement with the woman. Whether she thought he killed her, I don't know, but she made up her mind to wash her hands of him, and give him a final warning. On that very night she went to the PTA. Either Steve would clear out of his own accord, or she would tell Oscar everything.

But Steve had his mind set on owning the ranch someday, in whole or in part, so he killed her when she returned from the meeting. After all, he had a ready-made fall guy in Amos Blount, and when he primed me about him the next day, I fell for it!"

"But why should Steve have bothered to kill Mrs. Driver?"

"He said he was afraid Oscar might become suspicious, and he figured if all the women were killed who had blocked Blount from making his call, Blount would be in deeper, and suspicion would never fall on him."

The intercom on Pike's desk buzzed.

"Yes?"

"Bert O'Leary is raising hell down here, sheriff," a deputy said. "He says he wants to be let out, now that you've got Blevins in tow!"

The sheriff sighed.

"Tell him I'll be right down," he said.

O'Leary was pacing his cell and kicking things when the sheriff arrived.

"When are you going to release me!" he demanded.

"Well, now, if you're going to be released, it's going to have to be after your trial."

"My trial!"

"Sure. You know you killed your wife, O'Leary. You knew or suspected that she'd been seeing Blevins, and you killed her that morning during an argument over him."

"But I heard Blevins confessed!"

"Yes, to killing his sister-in-law and Mrs. Driver. So who is left to murder your wife but you? Unfortunately, you gave Steve the idea of committing his own murders, and even set the pattern. Too bad you had to start it all, O'Leary."

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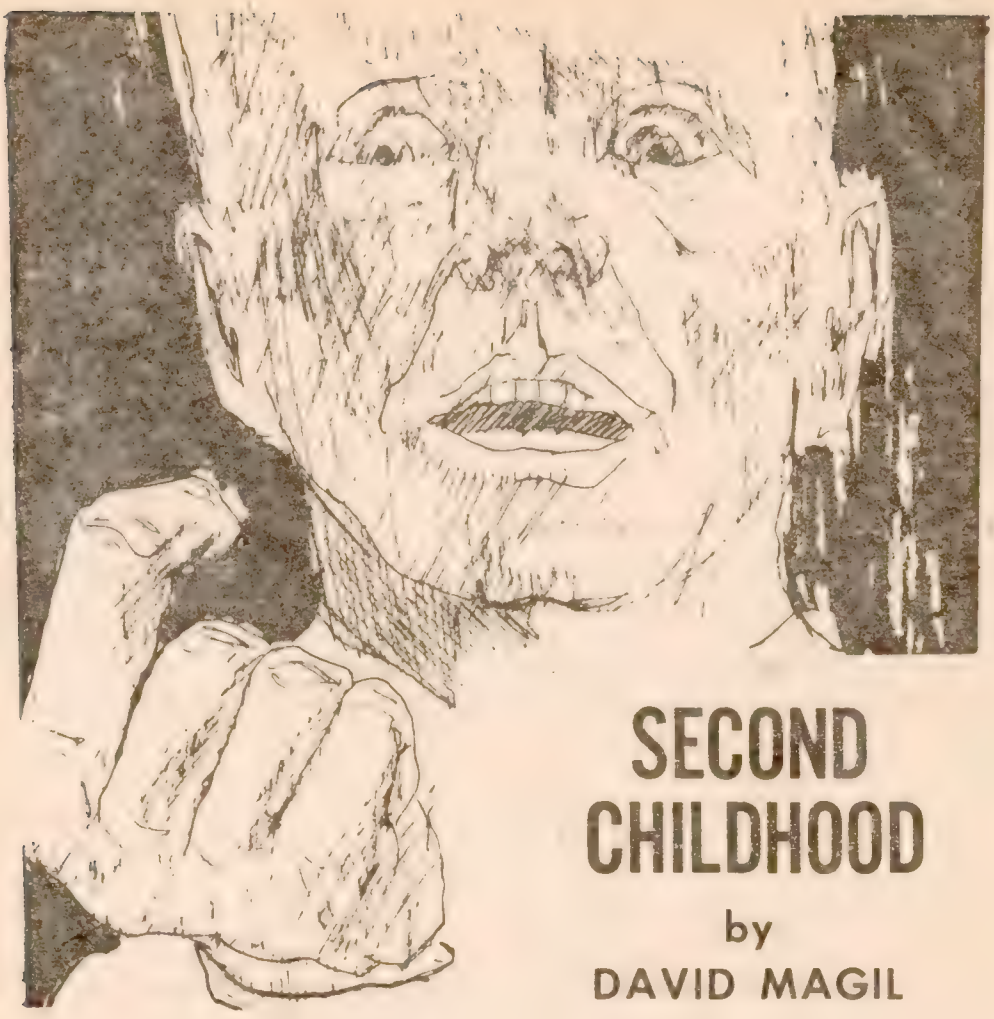

SECOND CHILDHOOD

by

DAVID MAGIL

The past was gone, he told himself. There was nothing to fear. Nothing?

THE MAN from travel and transportation retired, Isadore Abraham Feldman, got up on one more New York morning. Sitting on the edge of his bed he tried to remember who he was and where he was and what he was doing. The name he gradually remembered, though it didn't feel like his

name; but from travel and transportation he remembered not a thing. Like a hit on the head, or more likely the hardening of the arteries in his brain; but as far back as he could remember it was a confusion.

He knew he was old and on that morning, with the aches and hurts of being old he worked to choose between indifference and apathy and any alternative. The alternative that suddenly came into his brain was the Ginsburg Gambit. As that clarified, purpose flooded back into his life and he hurried through the ritual of washing, dressing, fishing his teeth from the glass, getting his hot water and lemon juice, eating his plate of stewed prunes and then as quickly as possible he left the house.

When he first had come the house was fine, but since he'd been it was taken over by hoodlums and hooligans so that most the neighbors had from the apartment house departed and safe it wasn't.

But I.A. hurried along. For years he had worked out the Ginzburg Gambit and finally, with a sudden shot of adrenalin in his veins, he knew that he was ready, the time had come, it was the day!

From the door of the apartment house, the Roney Plaza apartment house, its awning torn strips from too many winds and too much weather, I.A. peered out.

He looked for the purple jackets of the Vile Venoms, the gang whose turf included the Roney Plaza. He saw none of them. Perilously he pushed through the broken windowed door and with stiffened bones that all felt broken he eased down the stairs and onto the garbage littered street, where he watched for the Vile Venoms and took each small step convincing himself that the Ginzburg Gambit had to be unbeatable.

He saw one. He cringed. The Vile Venoms liked pushing him over when they came by, hitting him in the arm, knocking off his hat. Sometimes they could break bones, once even they beat him and he had to be in the hospital. He shivered. He stopped and huddled in terror of imminent physical pain beyond the manageable pain of being old and he waited against the brick wall, saying a prayer that maybe the VV wouldn't see him.

He didn't have on his thick bifocals because the VV broke them every time they could. Without them he was near blind. He waited and looked and then with relief he saw it was VV but only one and it

was one of the Debs. She went past, not even looking at him.

He went on. He went down the street to the Soul and Ribs Deli—used to be Fleishman's—and peered around the corner. There was nothing he saw, so he turned and hurried. Once he knew most people on the street. The ladies would from the windows stick their heads and a "Good morning, Mister Feldman," they would give him. The Shul he passed, but it wasn't a Shul anymore. They all had moved away and so the Shul they'd sold as a movie theater.

A girl with almost no clothes was on a picture there. I.A. looked at a few more of the stills, in each one the girl had less clothes, and he vaguely remembered being a young man in the twenties. But the still photographs and the flaccid memories didn't stir him. He was too old.

He reached the Park. He knew it wasn't safer, but he felt safer and he went to the benches and only then, ready to finally execute the Ginzburg Gambit, did he see. The Park had been charged. The benches had been broken or taken away. The concrete stumps with the chessboards implanted in them were gone.

"Ginzburg?" I.A. asked. "Ginzburg?"

There was no answer. There wasn't anyone. So I.A. lowered himself to a broken bench—the one, he thought, from where he'd fought Ginzburg day after day and year after year. In the dull gloom he felt, under the polluted New York sky, he remembered. Ginzburg, he should rest in peace, was no more. The VV had pushed him and old Ginzburg had fallen on the steps of the Shul and had broken his hip and from that he hadn't recovered. And from that, all the others had gone, driven out like from a pogrom. Ginzburg, his name should be remembered for good, even had his old apartment taken over as the clubhouse of the VV.

There was terrible injustice in that, I.A. thought. Life was not worth going on with such injustice, such cruelty, such pain. That he should emerge

from the holocaust to be terrorized, to have his friends liquidated by purple shirts who were no better than brown shirts?

This was a life? This was a way a man should live in his Golden Years? This is what the Statue of Liberty promised? That he couldn't have a game of chess; that he couldn't sit in the park with his friends; that he couldn't have a glass of tea even without being alone?

Suddenly, in his head, a clue to his lost past, martial music from the Auschwitz band and I.A.'s blood stirred. The passages of his brain cleared. He forgot the Ginzburg Gambit and he remembered his anger. In all the details, worked out in his rage after they did what they did to his good friend Ginzburg, he remembered the Final Solution.

For a second he wondered whether it wasn't too late. He questioned whether he still had the energy and he wondered even how it was that such a diabolical plan should have come to him. In travel and transportation did they have such plans? Or was he not in travel and transportation but in some other line of work?

He roused himself. Holding firmly to the Final Solution, he left the Park and walked slowly, determined not to show fear. The garbage men had been and had left more than they'd taken away. I.A. knew his bones were weak and knew that if he slipped and fell his bones would shatter like peanut brittle. So he picked his way, but without fear, to the old apartment of Ginzburg.

"I want to see Frankie," he told the boy cleaning his rifle in front of Ginzburg's door.

"What about, Izzie?"

"Business. I have a little proposition," I.A. said, afraid, but determined that he wouldn't show it.

The boy with the rifle reached back and knocked on Ginzburg's door. The door opened a little and there were exchanges and the door opened and closed each time. They spoke a language that was so modern I.A. only understood every few words. But finally they let him pass.

On a mattress on the floor was Frankie, the VV leader. Behind him on the wall there were stick men painted, showing how many they had killed in their battles. Frankie had an automatic machine gun beside him.

"So?" Frankie asked.

"I need money I should go to Miami Beach for the winter," I.A. choked, afraid. "I'm just an old man, but I wasn't always. You boys don't do nothin' but

make trouble. When I was young they called me Big Izzie. I know things, how to make a hold up and get away with it. From a professional you learn, like going to school; and you give me ten percent."

"Yeah?" Frankie said.

"I have one job. Perfect, it is. You and four of your best boys is what I need. But a secret. All my life I didn't come to go to prison at my age."

"Yeah?"

"You help me and I am helping you."

"What do we need you for?"

"An amateur can do it, but they get caught and hurt. You should do it right. A boy your age should have an occupation, not lying around with guns. You don't want a big new car? You don't want to live like a mensch?" I.A. asked. "Look. You think it over. For you it's an education. For me it's a winter in Miami Beach."

"Okay. What ideas you got, Big Izzie?"

"First I set it up. Then, tomorrow, you come to my apartment. I explain it. You listen and you make a decision."

The VV leader, Frankie, looked at the old man and said: "Maybe".

I.A. left and hurried as well as he was able, but he was careful to see that he wasn't followed. His destination was halfway across New York. It was a gambling den. The old brownstone had no markings on it to indicate what it was, but I.A. went and knocked on the door and asked to see Al.

"Al? Al's been dead eight years."

"His boy, little Johnnie?"

"Yeah. Johnnie's here. Who are you?"

"I.A. Feldman. Tell him an old friend of his father."

Johnnie wasn't the little boy that I.A. remembered. He was a man. He remembered I.A. and he listened. He wasn't enthusiastic, but he needed money and he saw the reason in I.A.'s *final solution*. Reluctantly, maybe because of the weather or because of guilts about his dead father, but for whatever reason he agreed.

Frankie and his chosen VVs came to I.A.'s apartment and I.A. turned into "Big Izzie" to set it up for them. He drew plans, he showed them positions, he instructed them in the means and methods.

The robbery was at dawn. A cleaning man came out of the brownstone and Big Izzie's gang charged in. The Casino's guards had been coached and they seemed to be caught flat-footed. The "Gang" didn't see the hidden guards with submachine guns who covered

them all every inch of the way.

The money, as Big Izzie had promised, was righ out on the tables. The VV satchel man shoveled it into his bag while Izzie's boys, in stocking masks, held their positions. Then Big Izzie's boys backed out, making their flawless escape with precisely the eight thousand dollars I.A. and Al's son Johnnie had agreed was right to whet their appetites.

The boys were overjoyed when they made their getaway and I.A. was more pleased than he'd been in a lot of years.

The VV didn't want to pay him his ten percent, but I.A. convinced them he had a big job lined up with big money in it, so they did pay. And I.A. gave the money back to Johnnie. Johnnie was a little nervous about his investment but I.A. convinced him to be patient.

I.A. was right. The VV didn't come near him for weeks. It took them that long to spend their money. But they did spend it and then they did come to him and ask him about the Big Job.

Izzie's memory didn't go back all that far, but he remembered that once he had worked as a janitor at the World New York Corn Exchange. He still had a savings account there, with seventy-three dollars and forty cents. He went to withdraw five dollars and while he was there he cased it. The television cameras were new, but the rest of the bank was just as he remembered it. Many of the old people he knew were still there. They all remembered him and said hello. But he cased it and he was satisfied.

Every day then he met with the VV and he made them memorize their moves and understand exactly what they had to do, even if things went wrong.

The night before they stole the van, the small truck and they stole the car they'd use for the getaway. I.A. went out and bought a garden hose and his ill fitting teeth almost fell out again and again as he smiled.

In the morning he went and got the truck and drove it to the alley and puttered around as he waited. From what he'd seen on television, before the junkie burglars took away his television, and from what he remembered working as a janitor, there was nothing to holding up a bank. Everyone always said to avoid trouble. Let the robbers have anything they wanted, they said.

But the getting away was the difficult part. Nobody got away with a bank job. Izzie worked on the truck while the VV moved into position. Izzie

thought that a little bit he was ashamed of himself, but at the same time he remembered that from the Ginzburg Gambit he'd been deprived, that the Shul showed dirty movies, that the Park was changed and no good, that the streets weren't safe, that the Roney Plaza was falling apart.

He waited and for the millionth time he tried to remember his past. He remembered the holocaust, the extermination camps; but strangely he had no bad memories of them, which was curious. But what had he been before? How had he gotten out? How had he survived? Very difficult, he thought, as he worked on the truck.

The boys dashed into the bank. Their unloaded guns pointed in every direction. Everyone was covered. Frankie shouted: "Nobody moves!" The satchel men ran around shoveling one hundred and eighty thousand dollars into their bags.

The VV wore stocking masks. They had gloves on and were dressed in especially baggy but otherwise nondescript clothes. None of the customers, none of the bank employees moved and following Big Izzie's Master Plan the gang made their strategic withdrawal, hurried out to the street, jumped into

their getaway car and sped off, driving the two blocks to the alley, blocking it, racing from the car into the back of I.A.'s waiting truck.

I.A. closed the doors on them and hurried around as much as he could hurry, admiring the sign on the truck panel that read: BIG DADDIE'S GEFILTE FISH and then he slowly climbed into the cab, started the motor and drove off.

He drove at speed limit. His eyes weren't so good and he wasn't a very good driver anymore. He'd taken off the inner door handle and he could hear the boys complaining about that, shrieking and crying, thumping and clawing—but maybe they weren't doing all that about the door handle. It could be they were protesting his little surprise of attaching the garden hose to the exhaust pipe and running it back into the truck with them.

He didn't feel Isadore Feldman as he listened, and it was strange because he had a vague recollection that he wasn't. So who was he, Ginzberg?

He drove on for a long while, making absolutely certain that there was enough time and then, only a block from the railroad station, in Long Island he parked and got out and went back to open the doors to let the carbon monoxide out and there he waited longer until Big Al's son Johnnie's man drove up and got out of his big car and came across to the truck. Ignoring the finally solved VV, the hoodlum climbed in to get the satchels of money. To I.A. the hoodlum said: "Quite a job, pops."

I.A. smiled, lifted an aged eyebrow. Call it a little prank, but suddenly there was an uncontrollable impulse that made him slam the door, walk around, climb into the gefilte fish truck's cab and start the motor.

When those thumpings and cries ended, I.A. aired out his little gas chamber again and then alone he carried the satchels of money over to the hoodlum's car.

Such a time he was having. He had a real Miami Beach tan, Havana cigars, good friends. Maybe Goldie with the blue hair, Sarah who had the son who was a foreign correspondent or Rose Cohen who'd just lost her Sam could be his girl. Such a life it was, good.

The young man was sitting in I.A.'s chair, in I.A.'s room.

"Oi," I.A. said. "Wait. Let me explain. Big Al always knew that I was a little careless with money. You should tell Johnnie—"

"Nothing to do with Johnnie, Hauptmann Hoess."

"Hah, you have the wrong man. My name is Izzie."

"No it isn't. Your name is Horst Hoess. You were born in Munchen of Aryan parents. You joined the S.A. in 1924, then the S.S. You were in charge of the cattle cars, the transport to the camps."

"Me? Isadore Feldman. You're calling me a Nazi?"

"You fled from the Russians. You took off your uniform, excised your SS tattoo, stole the papers of one of your victims, Feldman. . ."

"I'm Feldman."

"You were wounded, hospitalized by the British. When you recovered they showed you the torn papers you'd carried. You may or may not have genuinely forgotten your past," the hard, tough looking young man said. "On that table is our complete file. Photographs, documents, testimony from the War Crimes Trials at Nuremberg, Auschwitz, Yad Va'-Shem." The young man stopped.

I.A. walked over and put on his thick glasses and turned the pages, each page more slowly. "I'm not Jewish?"

"You're not."

"This is really me?"

"It's you. Even fingerprints."

"You're going to take me to Israel like Eichmann?"

"No. The world doesn't want to know. We're going to see that the money you stole is returned to the New York Authorities and then we're going to escort you back to your apartment in New York."

"And then?"

"At the same moment we'll make two telephone calls. One will go to your late friend Big Al's son Johnnie; the other call will be to the remnant of the VV. They know what you did."

"No," I.A. said, though he wasn't I.A. "You can't do that to me."

"Come on, old man. We have a plane to catch."

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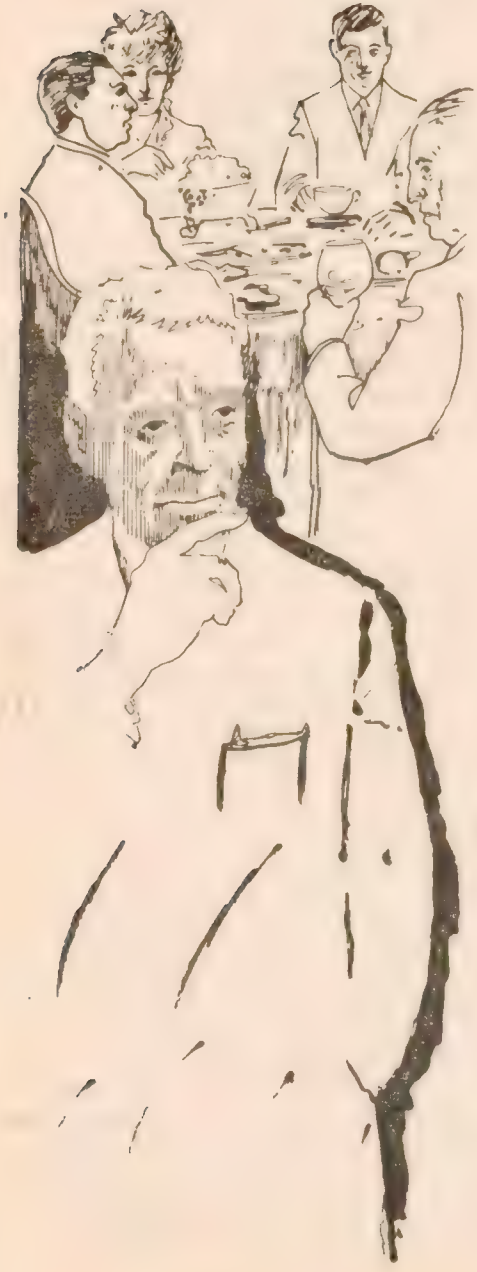
A GREAT SENSE OF HUMOR



He had a great sense of humor, Tony Rock had. A bullet-ridden man in a coffin knew why . . .

by

JONATHAN CRAIG

I'D NEVER even thought about it before Albert Acrobat brought it up that night at the regular little weekly get-together of our exiles' club here in Rio, but what he said was true, and I've often wondered since then why I'd never realized it before.

What Albert Acrobat said was that if there's any one thing that everybody in the outfit has in common, it's a sense of humor.

And he was right. As for myself, I may not have the best sense of humor in the outfit, but I have a pretty good one, even so. I'd have a better one if I weren't so serious-minded.

I'm always trying to improve myself. I read the Portuguese edition of the *Reader's Digest* every month, cover to cover. I'm not bragging, you understand; I'm just stating a fact.

The reason I can read Portuguese so well is that I've been down here in Rio quite awhile now. And the reason I'm here is the same reason all the other exiles are here. We all got out of the States just one jump ahead of life imprisonment. We're all allergic to a one room apartment for the rest of our lives, you might say.

There are maybe a couple dozen of us in the exiles' club now, fine folks like Seldom Seen and Millie from Milwaukee and Charley One and Charley Two and Preacher and The Wild Man and Johnny the Knock and Slow Sue and Willie the Weep and a lot of other fine folks. A really wonderful bunch of people.

The trouble is, we get homesick sometimes. Brazil's a nice place to live, but we all miss the States. Anyhow, it helps to get together now and then, so once a week we rent this private dining room in a hotel on Copacabana Beach and sort of bend the elbow a bit and cut up old times.

This dining room has a big round table in it, so we can all sit there and see everybody else without having to crane our necks all out of joint. It's mighty fine, being able to get together like that, and it does us all a lot of good.

On this particular night I'm talking about, I'd brought along a stenographer's notebook and a ballpoint pen and every once in a while I'd jot down a note or two. For a long time nobody said anything about it, but then curiosity got the better of Albert Acrobat.

One thing about Albert Acrobat. When he wants to know something, he says so. Another thing about him is, he's so skinny he has to stand twice to cast a shadow. So now he paused with his glass in mid-air, so to speak, and raised one eyebrow about a quarter of an inch.

"What're you doing with this thing, Scholar?" he said. "You the new recording secretary of this club, or what?"

"Well," I said, "I was thinking I might write a history of the outfit, sort of."

That got everybody's interest, all right. They all just stopped in mid-sentence, so to speak, and stared at me.

"You what?" Albert Acrobat said. "A history, you say?"

"Why not?" I said. "It'd be something everybody's grandchildren would be real proud to read."

"But a history?" Charley One said. "You mean, with real names and dates and places and all?"

"No, of course not," I said. "Everything would be disguised. "It'd be—well, like a monument to the outfit, you might say."

"A monument?" Charley Two said. "A monument, Scholar?"

"All the important outfits have their histories written, Charley," I said. "All the big corporations. General Motors. The U.S. Army. Even all the big-city police departments have them. I think we ought to, too."

"He's right," Millie from Milwaukee said. "We've got a better history than any of those birds. In fact, we've got a better history than all of them put together."

"But no names, right?" the Indian said. "I mean, you wouldn't put something in there, and then say that the Indian or Millie from Milwaukee did it, would you? No real names?"

"No," I said. "I wouldn't be so dumb as to do that."

Three-Time George said, "You got a name for it yet, Scholar?"

"I thought maybe I'd call it 'Great Moments in American Crime,'" I said.

Everybody was quiet for a while, thinking it over.

"You going to have us girls in it?" Slow Sue said. "Me and Millie and Laughing Girl and Betty C. and Pretty Penny and all the other ladies?"

"Sure," I said.

"Well, then I'm for it one hundred per cent," Slow Sue said. "Because, if it wasn't for women, a lot of the boys wouldn't be where they are today."

"That's the God's truth," Millie from Milwaukee said.

"It sure is," Johnny the Knock said. "Meaning six feet under ground."

"Shut up, Johnny," Millie from Milwaukee said. "Just because Baby Sunshine tried to set you on fire that time is no reason to—"

But she didn't get any further, because everybody at the table had started laughing so loud. It was pretty funny, the way Baby Sunshine had poured gasoline all over Johnny one day while he was asleep, and then couldn't find a match to set him on fire with. By the time she'd run next door to borrow one, Johnny had woke up, and when she got back he threw her out the window.

Everybody kept laughing, and after a while even Johnny began to laugh a little.

"She was quite a girl, that

Baby Sunshine," he said, shaking his head. "She was still trying to strike that match when I heaved her over the window sill."

"Of course, the joke was really on me," Slow Sue said. "It was my brand-new dress she was wearing that day, Johnny. I always felt you owed me another one."

"Speaking of setting people on fire," the Indian said. "You remember when Fader Jake hired Arson Eddie to set that warehouse on fire, and Eddie got butter-fingered and set himself on fire instead? Now *that* was funny."

"Not as funny as when Country Boy made Benny the Booze the Top Man in the outfit, though," Charley Two said. "Remember when Country Boy was here a couple of years ago and told us about it?"

Well, that broke everybody up again. Because, of course, everybody did remember. It had been one of those really great moments in the history of American crime.

What had happened was that Benny the Booze had wanted to be Top Man, and had hired a hit man named Country Boy, a real ice-pick artist, to knock off the five members of the outfit who stood between Benny and the Top Man job: Fat Felix, Angie Aces, Little Vincent, Key-Cee Matcher, and the Top Man himself, Tony Rock.

Well, Country Boy made Benny the Booze the Top Man, all right, but before he did it he had a little talk with Tony Rock, the Top Man himself. Then he knocked off the other four boys and buried them in the same grave, one on top of the other, just the way Benny had paid him to do. But then he pulled a switch, and instead of knocking off Tony Rock too, which would have made Benny the Booze the Top Man, he knocked off Benny himself, which was a big surprise to Benny.

But Country Boy still made Benny the Top Man, because he put Benny in that hole on top of the other four boys who were already in there. He'd made him the Top Man, all right—the top man in the grave.

Ever since then, all you had to do to start everybody in the exiles' club rolling on the floor was to mention something about Benny the Booze.

When the laughter had died down a little, Albert Acrobat wiped his eyes and said, "Well, nobody can ever say we haven't all got a sense of humor." He paused to look around the table. "It's a fact," he said, nodding slowly. "If it wasn't for a sense of humor, I wouldn't be here tonight."

"You wouldn't?" Preacher said.

"No," Albert Acrobat said. "Thinking of Tony Rock just now reminded me of it."

Well, then, of course, Albert Acrobat stood up. Just like all the rest of us did. It's our custom in the club, the first time Tony Rock's name is mentioned during the evening, to stand up and offer a moment of silent tribute. After all, Tony Rock is the Top Man in the outfit; it's his due.

We all sat down again, and Albert Acrobat said, "This will just prove what I said about how important a sense of humor is. I'd say I had a good sense of humor. Very good, in fact. But Tony Rock has a better one. He has a great sense of humor."

"That's the God's truth," Millie from Milwaukee said.

"And it's only because we both have a sense of humor that I'm here tonight," Albert Acrobat said.

"What happened?" Willie the Weep asked.

"Well, first, let me ask you all a question," Albert said. "Has anybody here ever ever heard of Beauregard Calhoun?"

Everybody looked at everybody else and shook their heads.

"I thought not," Albert said, smiling to himself a little. "Well, what happened to Beauregard Calhoun was about as funny as a thing can get. It's something you'll want to put in that history you're going to write, Scholar. What was that title again, now?"

"'Great Moments in American Crime,'" I said.

He nodded. "Well, Beauregard sure had his great moments, all right. He was a loner, a good old boy from Horry County, South Carolina. Everybody called him Beau. He hit the big town the same time I did, forty-five years ago."

"You ain't that old, are you, Albert?" The Wild Man said.

"I wouldn't be if it wasn't for Tony Rock's sense of humor," Albert said.

"Go on, Albert," Seldom Seen said. "What about this Beauregard Calhoun?"

"Well, like I said, he was a loner," Albert said. "He made the scene just after Tony Rock had finished setting up the outfit. For a while it looked like he was starting a whole crime wave all by himself."

"What was his speciality?" Slow Sue asked.

"He didn't have any. He was just sort of in general practice, as they say. After a while he settled down to burglary, mostly. Second-story stuff. But at first he was just as likely to be planting a bomb somewhere

as he was to be hitting somebody on a contract or selling some speakeasy a little protection. He was sort of an all-around threat, Beau was."

"He wasn't in the outfit?" Willie the Weep said.

"No," Albert said. "Not then. In fact, he was almost a one-man outfit all by himself. He was even starting to make the real outfit—Tony Rock's outfit—a little nervous."

"He must have really been something," Slow Sue said.

"He was," Albert said. "He was a heller with the ladies, too. He didn't expect to live long, so he did a lot of living on the way. After his first big score, he up and married this showgirl, Long Louise. She was about two feet taller than Beau, and every inch of her gorgeous."

Albert sighed. "For a couple of years, Beau had it all. A beautiful wife, and money in every pocket, and the good life all the way around. And then one day the roof fell in."

"He got busted?" The Wild Man said.

"He got busted, all right," Albert said. "But that was only the start of it. He got hit for twenty thousand dollars bail, all told, on maybe half a dozen charges, and he couldn't get at any of his own money, so he had to go to Max the Bondsman."

"I remember him," Frankie the Feeb said. "He was the most nervous character I ever met in my life."

"Max was nervous, for a fact," Albert said. "And the minute he put up the bond for Beau, he started sweating about Beau jumping it and leaving him the loser for twenty grand." He paused. "And he had good reason to sweat, too, because that's just exactly what Beau was planning to do."

"Naturally," the Indian said. "What else?"

"But that was only the beginning of Beau's troubles," Albert said. "You see, in addition to this gorgeous wife, he also had this girl friend, Sugarlip." He shook his head, remembering. "Another beauty."

"Well, I don't see any real problems there," Seldom Seen said. "Lots of the boys have—"

"No problems, eh?" Albert said. "Well, it just so happens that this Sugarlip was also somebody else's girl friend. And who was this somebody else? No one but the Top Man, Tony Rock himself."

A gasp went up around the table. We all knew that certain people had been known to die very suddenly for so much as saying hello to one of Tony Rock's girl friends.

"What was the matter with this Beau, anyhow?" Silent Knight said. "Was he crazy, or what?"

"No," Albert said. "It's just that he didn't know about Tony. This Sugarlip was a very forgetful girl, you see. She forgot to tell Beau anything about him. And the other way around, too. She forgot to tell Tony Rock anything about Beau, either."

Slow Sue laughed. "Good for her," she said. "I like that girl already."

"And then," Albert said, "right after Beau got out on bail, and Max the Bondsman started sweating, Tony Rock did find out."

"And that's when the roof fell in?" Willie the Weep said.

"You said it," Albert said. "Right off, Tony Rock gave a contract to a hit man named Crowbar to go over to Beau's place and put him out of the picture. In fact, he was so heated up that he went right along with him to see that the job was done right. I think maybe he meant to add a few little touches with the end of a lighted cigar or something."

"That's good old Tony Rock, all right," Preacher said. "He was never one to fool around."

"And so what happened, Albert?" Charley Two said.

"Tony and Crowbar got there a little too late," Albert said. "Beau had already lit out for the hills."

"Hills?" Slow Sue said. "What hills? You mean the Catskills?"

"No, I mean the real hills," Albert said. "The hills of South Carolina, where he was from. He'd decided to call it a career. He was from a little town called Grubb, and that was where he was headed." He paused.

"Anyhow, when Tony Rock and his hit man, Crowbar, got to Beau's place and found out they were too late, they were about as mad as any two men can get. But they weren't the only ones. When Beau's wife, Long Louise, found out why they were there because of Sugarlip, she got just as mad as either one of them."

"Did she know where Beau was?" Johnny the Knock said.

"Yes," Albert said. "And she wasn't long telling them, either. She was just as anxious to see Beau hit as they were to hit him. What's more, she'd just remembered she had a ten thousand dollar double-indemnity policy on Beau's life. Which meant that a dead Beau would be worth twenty thousand dollars to her. That was a lot of money in those days, you know."

"She was a smart girl, that Long Louise," Slow Sue said. "I like that girl, too, Albert. I like her and Sugarlip both."

"And then who should phone Beau's place, worrying about the twenty thousand dollar bond he'd put up on him, but Max the Bondsman," Albert said. "So Tony tells him the score, and that they're going after Beau. And Max says he's coming over to go with them, and he does. But Tony Rock is so far gone on Sugarlip that he can't bear to leave her behind, so they pick her up and off they go, all of them in Tony Rock's big Packard, headed for Grubb, South Carolina."

"What was Max the Bondsman along for?" Millie from Milwaukee said.

"Because he had to prove the dead body was Beau's," Albert said. "Otherwise, he'd have to forfeit that twenty grand. And Long Louise was along for the same reason. She'd have to prove Beau was dead in order to collect her twenty grand."

"Any man's worth more dead than alive, I always say," Slow Sue said. "And I've got a couple of ex-husbands to prove it, if they was in any position to."

"Anyhow, it was the first time any of them had ever been out of the big town," Albert said. "They bought a few bottles and some things and made sort of an excursion out of it. It was good to get away from the old grind for awhile. They took turns driving, and they were in South Carolina in no time at all. And they're hardly across the line, and enjoying the wonderful scenery and all, when they see old Beau's car parked in front of a tourist cabin, just outside a fair-sized town called Wart.

"They didn't have motels in

those days, you know. They had these little shacks, maybe a half-dozen or so, strung out along the highway here and there, and not even very many of those. Beau'd been dead for sleep, so he'd rented one and hit the sheets."

"And got hit himself," the Indian said.

Albert Acrobat frowned at him. "Who's telling this?" he said. "Tony Rock and the others kept on going. They went through the town and on to a big inn, kind of, on the other side of it. A kind of a resort place, like they have all over South Carolina. And after Tony Rock had rented a whole floor for them, they all got together in Tony's suite for a conference. It was all real businesslike, the way it always is with Tony.

"The way Tony set it up, Crowbar would take the Packard and go back to the tourist cabin and hit Beau. And then, since they were all already down there in South Carolina, Crowbar would drive on to Rocky Mount and hit this other guy that Tony Rock didn't like. I don't know just who this guy was, but it was somebody that'd crossed Tony a long time back. Tony has a long memory, and he figured that while he was so handy he might as well have him hit."

"That's good old Tony Rock for you, all right," Preacher said. "He was always one to make the most of every opportunity."

"Well," Albert Acrobat said, "Crowbar put the silencer on his gun and drove off in the Packard, figuring to be gone overnight at least, and Tony Rock and the others ordered up some more booze and food and figured they'd pass the time by having a party. Which they did. And the next morning, Tony Rock turns on the big Atwater-Kent radio in his suite, and the news guy on the local radio station is saying that a man named Beauregard Calhoun was shot and killed at a tourist cabin last night and his body has been taken to the Wart Furniture Store and Funeral Parlor.

"It was good news, of course, and everybody had a drink to celebrate, and then they called a taxi and went over to the funeral parlor, very happy and excited. Everybody was a winner, you see, and all they had to do now was identify Beau for the record so that Long Louise would get her twenty thousand dollars insurance and Max the Bondsman wouldn't lose his twenty thousand dollar bond.

"When they got to the funeral home, which was in the

back room of this furniture store, they see that the undertaker has put old Beau's body in a pauper's box, and set it on a couple of sawhorses, which is the way they used to do things in those days.

"And so the men take off their hats, and the girls work up a few tears, and they all line up to file past the box and take their last look at Beauregard Calhoun. Meanwhile, Tony Rock has passed the undertaker a couple of hundred bucks to pay for a funeral, and so the undertaker is standing there, too, happy as can be about the two hundred but trying to look sorrowful like everybody else. There were some town loafers there too, lounging around on the folding chairs the undertaker had strung out in front of the box.

"Well, of course, the first one to look in the box was Tony Rock himself. He walked up to it, and looked down in it, and then just kept looking down in it while his face slowly turns pale and his eyes begin to bug a little. Then he wets his lips and looks out in the middle distance a while, and then he turns around, real slow, and walks real slow over to one of the folding chairs and sits down real slow, shaking his head."

Albert Acrobat paused to take a sip of his drink, glancing around at us over the rim of his glass. You never heard so many people make so little sound in your life.

"The next one to go up and look in the box was Long Louise," Albert said. "Her eyes got as big as dollars, and she lets out this big, long gasp, and for a minute it looked like she was going to keel over and fall right into the box herself. She gets so pale her rouge sticks out on her cheeks like orange poker chips."

"What the hell was going on?" Willie the Weep said.

Albert Acrobat ignored him. "And so Long Louise staggers over to the row of folding chairs and plops down by Tony Rock and closes her eyes and just sits there like a statue, except that now and then she twitches a bit.

"And the next one to look down in the box is Max the Bondsman. He was a nervous man, like I told you, and he no sooner looks in the box but he begins to shake all over. He stands there, shaking, while the sweat pours off his face and his jaw sags down to his chest. And finally he zigzags across to the chairs and collapses on one of them and covers his face with his hands and sits there and bawls out loud."

"Listen, Albert," the Wild Man said, "what the hell was—"

Albert held up his hand to shush him. "Which leaves only Sugarlip left to take a look," he said. "Like I told you, this Sugarlip was one beautiful female, but none too bright. Anyhow, she kind of slinks up to the box and parks her gum on a hind tooth for a minute and glances down sidelong in the box. And for about fifteen seconds or so she doesn't move a hair. She just stands there, like she's frozen, without changing expression at all. And then she turns around toward the others, inch by inch you might say, and pops her gum a couple of times and points down in the box and says, 'Did you all notice something? That ain't Beauregard Calhoun in there. It's that nasty old Crowbar.'"

There was another of those big, loud silences, if you know what I mean.

Then, "What?" Silent Knight said. "Did you say Crowbar? The hit man that was supposed to knock Beau off?"

"That's right," Albert said. "The man in that box was nobody but Crowbar, the hit man."

"But listen," Charley One said. "You said the news guy on the radio said the dead man was Beauregard Calhoun."

"He did," Albert said. "And that's what everybody thought, including the police. What else would they think when the body had Beau's billfold and identification in its pockets?"

"How'd they get there?" Silent Knight said.

"I'll get to that in a minute," Albert said. "Well, I guess you've got the picture—Tony Rock and all the others sitting there in a row, pale and bug-eyed and crying and so on. And then suddenly from this side door, which was open a crack, there's this sound of somebody snorting and gasping and trying to keep from laughing out loud, and then finally not able to hold it in any longer and busting right out with it, just laughing like crazy.

"Well, everybody jumps up, and Tony Rock gets to the door first, and who's standing there but Beauregard Calhoun, with a gun in his hand but doubled up and laughing so hard he's helpless. He tries to raise the gun up, but he can't do it, and Tony Rock kicks it out of his hand and jams his own gun in Beau's stomach, and if it hadn't been for the undertaker and the loafers being witnesses, he'd have blown a hole in Beau right then and there. But as it was, he marches him out into the alley, with all the others crowding along, and shoves him up against a brick wall and tells him to start talking while he's

still alive because he's not going to stay that way very long.

"And so Beau says he knows it, but it was worth it, just to see the looks on all their faces when they looked in that box. And he says that when Crowbar came to hit him, he saw him sneaking up in the dark and went out the window and came around behind him and put a slug in the back of his head. And then, he says, he put his billfold and other stuff in Crowbar's pockets and hid the Packard and sat in it listening to the radio and trying to figure out what to do.

"The next morning, he heard the news guy on the radio say a man named Beauregard Calhoun had been killed and his body taken to the funeral parlor, and a little later he saw a taxi go by with Tony Rock and the others in it, and so he put two and two together and figured that that was where they were going, to the funeral parlor. And so he got pretty mad, and the more he thought about it, the madder he got, and so he figured he'd go there, too, where they'd all be in a bunch, and not suspecting anything, and kill the lot of them."

"The whole bunch?" Millie from Milwaukee said.

"Right," Albert said. "But anyhow, there was old Beau, standing there against the wall in the alley, with Tony Rock's gun jammed in his stomach, and laughing so hard he can hardly stand up. He's remembering the expressions on all their faces when they looked in that box, and it's too much for him. He had what you might call one hell of a sense of humor.

"When Tony Rock asks him what he's laughing at, Beau tells him. And pretty soon Tony Rock smiles a little, and then he can't help himself either, and he starts to laugh just like Beau. Like I told you, Tony Rock has a great sense of humor. And Beau knew it, and so he pointed out that the joke was on all of them, but especially on poor old Crowbar, who'd figured to put Beau in a box but who'd ended up in the box himself. Which was so funny that it starts Long Louise, and then Max the Bondsman, and finally even Sugarlip to laughing too."

By this time, everybody around the table was ready to break up again. There was no getting around it; it was a very funny situation, when you stopped to think about it—especially for Crowbar.

"Well, there they were," Albert Acrobat said. "Tony Rock with his gun in Beau's stomach but laughing, just like the rest of them, and Beau says the whole joke is twice as funny

because everything has come out just as if Crowbar had gone ahead and killed him, because Beau put his billfold and other stuff in Crowbar's pockets and now everybody thinks the dead man is Beauregard Calhoun. Which meant that Max the Bondsman wouldn't have to forfeit his bail money and that Long Louise would be able to collect her insurance.

"As for Sugarlip, Beau says, Tony Rock ought to be glad that Beau has exposed her for the two-timing, stupid girl she is. A girl stupid enough to two-time a man like Tony Rock, and stupid enough to give away the fact that the man in the box wasn't Beau, right in front of the undertaker and the other witnesses the way she had—well, a two-timing, stupid girl like that certainly wasn't the kind of a girl for a man like Tony Rock."

"That was pretty fast thinking," Millie from Milwaukee said. "What happened then, Albert?"

"Everything that Beau said was true, and they could all see it," Albert said. "The joke was on everybody. And yet they'd all come up winners except Sugarlip, and she didn't count, not any more."

I'd been jotting down a few things in my notebook.

"Why'd Beau put his wallet

and identification in Crowbar's pockets in the first place, Albert?" I said.

"Because he wanted everybody to think he'd been killed," Albert said. "That way, he'd buy some time before whoever had sent the hit man found out the truth and sent another one. He didn't know it was Tony Rock that'd sent Crowbar to hit him, you see. He didn't know it until he saw Tony and the others in the taxi the next morning."

"Yes," Millie from Milwaukee said, "but what happened then, Albert?"

"Tony Rock's great sense of

humor saved the day," Albert said. "If there's anything Tony likes, it's a joke, and if there's anything he especially likes, it's a joke on himself. And so he puts his gun up, and he and Beau and the rest of them go to where Beau's hid the Packard and drive back to the inn and break out some fresh bottles and resume the party they'd broke up to go to the funeral parlor."

"Hey!" Slow Sue said. "I've just this second realized something. There never was anybody named Beauregard Calhoun. This guy you've been talking about all along is you, Albert. Right?"

"Wrong," Albert said. "I kept talking about Beauregard Calhoun because that's who I was—until I killed myself, so to speak, by putting my billfold and identification in Crowbar's pockets. Then Beauregard Calhoun was dead, and I had to become somebody else, and so I became Albert Acrobat."

"You've got a pretty good sense of humor, yourself," I said.

"Nothing like Tony Rock's, though," Albert said. "Tony Rock, now, he's got a great sense of humor. For instance, he could see the humor in making me his new hit man to replace Crowbar, which he did. And he could see the humor in making Sugarlip the first person I hit, which he did."

Albert Acrobat stood up. "A toast, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "To Tony Rock, the man with the greatest sense of humor in the outfit."

We all stood up and drank, and when we had sat back down again, first one and then another of us began to laugh. Not loud and vulgarly, of course, but sort of soft and enjoyably. Nobody said anything, but nobody had to, because we all knew we were laughing about the same thing.

We were laughing about the expressions on Tony Rock's and Long Louise's and Max the Bondsman's and Sugarlip's faces when they filed past that box in the back room of the funeral parlor and saw that the dead man in there wasn't Beauregard Calhoun.

I'd never forget it, I knew. It was truly one of the great moments in American crime.

Next MONTH: IT'S NOT A COFFIN by Bill Pronzini

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by RICHARD M. ROSE

Damsel in Distress

The file was confidential—so confidential that he would even kill to keep its secret . . .

IT'S NOT every day you meet a ghost. Especially a shapely barefoot ghost in a revealing Pucci print mini dress. And even more especially after an invigorating early morning sprint and an earthy breakfast of eggs, sausage and coffee. Three cups.

Which is why I stood there

in my damp sweatsuit, mouth agape, eyes blinking at the lovely apparition in the doorway of my high-rise apartment. As I gaped and blinked, the headline of the *Chicago Herald* flashed vividly across my mind.

GIRL MISSING IN LAKE STORM.

LAUNCH PARTY TURNS TO TRAGEDY.

I blinked again. The young face before me was bleached of color but definitely the same as pictured in the *Herald*. Round, pug-nosed, dimpled. Pale blue eyes tried to focus on me through a straggle of ash blonde hair.

"Mr. Redman, the lawyer?" Her voice was little more than a whisper.

I managed to nod.

"Please. . ."

She started to sag. I caught her, carried her to the couch, propped her up against some pillows. Then I went for medication, a generous dose of Courvoisier. She swallowed half of it, made a face. For a moment she stared vaguely at my twenty-story view of Lake Michigan drenched in brilliant August sunlight.

"I'm. . .I'm sorry."

I sat down next to her with my fourth cup of coffee. "It's okay, Miss. . .?"

"Maddax. Margot Maddax, Mr. Redman. And I need help."

Damn! That tragic catch in the voice, helpless pleading look in the pale blue eyes. The symptoms were obvious. Trouble for Steve Redman any way you looked at it.

"I've heard you're not afraid to—well, bend a few rules to help people. 'A cavalier cop,' that's what Dad—Judge Blackburn—calls you. Not that he exactly approves of your methods."

"Ex-cavalier cop," I corrected her. "And do you mean Judge William Blackburn?"

She nodded. "My stepfather. He and Mom were married three years ago. I never knew my real dad but the judge has been, well, just super, you know."

That figured. The judge was a super kind of person, and one of the most respected men on the circuit court bench. "Maybe we'd better inform the judge you're among the living, Margot."

Her hand clutched my arm, slopping coffee onto my sweat pants. "No, please. I mean he and Mom are in the Bahamas anyway, on vacation. And, well, I don't want anyone to know I'm alive."

"Mind telling me why?"

Margot Maddax gulped the rest of her brandy. Her voice was intense. "Mr. Redman, that accident was no accident.

They. . .they tried to murder me!"

I knew it. Trouble. "*They*, Margot?"

"Mr Greim—or one of his associates. At least, that's what he calls them."

"Not Alex Greim."

"Yes, do you know him?"

I knew him as "The Fixer." That's what we called Greim in my badge-carrying days. Bribery, blackmail and forceful persuasion were Greim's specialties. And he'd performed them skillfully as one of Capo Alberto Desantis' top lieutenants. That is, until Capo Desantis had a falling out with the Brotherhood and collected three fatal slugs from a Mafioso hit man.

I let out my breath slowly. "How in the hell did you get involved with Alex Greim?"

"I wasn't involved. I just took a job, that's all, with Amusement Enterprises. I'm an executive secretary, you see."

I saw. Alex Greim *is* Amusement Enterprises, a growing chain of restaurants, movie theatres and indoor tennis clubs that was making nothing but money. Rumor had it Greim had set up Desantis and Amusement Enterprises was the pay-off.

"So what happened, Margot?"

Margot Maddax held up her empty glass. I filled it. She sipped, pouting reflectively.

"I'm not sure. But three days ago I went into Mr. Greim's private office for something, I can't even remember what, and found his desk covered with manila folders. Well, I'd just begun to straighten them up when Mr. Greim came storming into the room raving at me to get out and not mess with his private papers."

She paused to sip her brandy. I lit up a cigar and waited.

"Later, he apologized. But after that I could feel him watching me like, well, like he suspected me of something. It was creepy, you know."

"Did you happen to get a glimpse of the contents of those folders, Margot?"

She shook her head. "There were names on them but I don't remember. Wait, there was one name—Christopher Kean. He's some kind of politician, isn't he?"

"A state senator, to be exact."

Her eyes widened. "Hey, wow, do you think that file contained something, well, incriminating, Mr. Redman?"

I more than supposed. But I exhaled smoke and said, "Could be, Margot. What happened last night?"

The girl raised the glass to her lips, her hand trembling. "Well, after work Mr. Greim invited me to join a few people on his launch for a party. Invited! Insisted was more like it. Mr. Nolan and that Sid person of his drove me to the pier and practically carried me on board."

I got up to pour myself another cup of coffee. "Go on."

"Well, we went out about a mile or so. We all had some drinks and I was beginning to think the whole thing was just my imagination. Then the storm came up." A shudder rippled along her lovely body. "I was on deck. It was pitch black and the launch was rolling wildly. The next thing I knew I was in the water. But I didn't fall, Mr. Redman. I was pushed."

"You're either very lucky or one hell of a swimmer, Margot."

She grinned weakly. "I almost made the Olympics."

"Well, you couldn't have picked a better time to win a gold medal. But it seems to me you should be telling this to the police."

"Tell them what, Mr. Redman? I can't prove a darn thing. Unless. . ."

I didn't like the sound of that "unless." Or the way she blinked those pale blue eyes at me.

"Unless. . .well, you could get that file. And if it is incriminating. . ."

She hesitated. Maybe it was the way I was looking at her. When I spoke I tried to keep my voice subdued.

"Let me tell you something, Margot Maddax. I spent two years killing people in Viet Nam and all I got out of it was a guilty conscience and a couple of medals. Then I joined Chicago's finest, maybe because I thought the real war was here, at home. But there's not much you can do when the four star generals operate above the law."

I paused for a reaction. Nothing. The blue eyes just kept working on me.

"So I wised up. Turned in my badge for a diploma and a nice, soft, safe life. It took six years of night school to get, and you're asking me to blow it. Or worse, to commit suicide. Sorry, but Don Quixote has hung up his lance."

The blue eyes began to spark. "I see. I guess Dad was wrong about you, Mr. Redman."

I watched her lurch to her feet, tug the mini dress over a smooth gleam of thigh. I sighed. "Sit down, Margot."

She studied my face. "You will help, then?"

I would. Even while I was making my big speech, I knew I had to give it a shot. Not just for Margot Maddax, but for myself. Because I owed Alex Greim.

I quickly showered and dressed while Margot finished her drink and helped herself to another. She needed it. She also needed a little help into the bedroom. Obviously, she couldn't go to her own apartment, so that meant I had a house guest. Before I left, I tucked her in bed with my .38 Special as a companion.

"Thank you, Don Quixote," she slurred, smiling up at me, her eyes half closed.

She was asleep before I left the room.

First stop, my office, One South LaSalle, and an hour of boning up for a case. Then two hours in court. I didn't get around to Alex Greim until nearly noon.

The executive offices of Amusement Enterprises and Greim's own apartment occupied an ancient three-story building on Ontario just north of the Loop. Les Fleurs Restaurant took up the ground floor. Greim, something of a gourmet, had renovated the building when he'd bought Les Fleurs three years ago.

I was impressed with the face-lifting. An escalator flanking a carpeted stairway glided me up to a large, plushly furnished reception room. A pretty receptionist flashed a luxurious smile as I asked for a few minutes of her employer's time.

"Do you have an appointment, Mr. Redman?"

"No, but I don't think Alex will mind."

She hesitated. I watched her eyes sweep over my trim six feet two, linger quizzically on my face. She was thinking it was a little too gaunt to be called handsome, asking herself if I'm really as hard as the look in steel grey eyes, and deciding the mustache made me look a little like a B-western heavy. She also decided not to argue.

"Mr. Greim can give you a few minutes, Mr. Redman," she said, cradling the receiver.

Miss Albright led the way down a long corridor flanked by several offices with titles stenciled on the doors. The door at the end of the corridor was of heavy oak. The hulk outside the door looked just as impenetrable. I could sense bulging muscles flexing restlessly under the natty tweed sport coat.

Miss Albright looked uncomfortable. "It's all right, Mr. Lasky. Mr. Greim will see the gentlemen."

Mr. Lasky gave me a hard look. The face was youthful, almost little boy. The kind of little boy who pulls wings off butterflies. He moved just far enough for me to pass.

Greim's office was roomy, oak-paneled and covered with enough paintings to qualify as an art gallery. Alex sat behind a sprawling black-topped desk studying some papers before him. He didn't bother to look up as I settled myself in one of the leather arm chairs.

"You got five minutes, Redman," Greim said. His voice came on like a semi truck without a muffler.

I lit up a cigar. "I see you made the front page this morning, Alex."

This time he looked at me. It was not a nice look. Not a nice face either. A face chipped clumsily out of granite. Shrewd crocodile eyes gleamed at me nastily.

"Yeah, a damned shame. Margot was a sweet kid. I'm real sick about it."

"Yes, you look all choked up, Alex. Mind telling me how it happened?"

Greim released an irritated snort, leaned back in his big wing-backed swivel chair. The chair seemed to dwarf his stocky, tough-looking frame. "Go talk to the cops, Redman. They got all the facts. Now, if there's nothing else on your mind."

I ignored the obvious request to leave. "My client thinks Margot Maddax's death was something more than an act of God, Alex."

I watched his reaction.

Nothing moved in the granite face.

"I'll tell you just once, Redman. I liked the kid. I don't like what happened to her. But it was an accident pure and simple."

"Was it, Alex?"

Alex made a choking sound that was intended as a laugh. "Come on, Redman. If I wanted someone hit, would I throw a party for the occasion? Besides, what's the motive? I hardly knew the girl."

I didn't want to tip my hand that I knew about the file. So I said, "No, not the girl. But her step-father, Judge Blackburn."

Greim's jaw dropped a fraction of an inch. Then his thick lips curled into a smirk. "Blackburn. No kidding? Hey, that's very funny, Redman."

"Yes, the judge used to hand Desantis' boys some real laughs in court, didn't he, Alex? Maybe you're just getting even."

The smirk vanished. "You're fishing, Redman. Don't push me. Or have you forgotten I had you suspended once when you were a cop?"

I hadn't forgotten. Greim had put in the fix after I'd busted some of Desantis' junk shops. "Let's say that's one I owe *you*, Alex."

"Forget it. I still have friends, Redman. The kind who can get you disbarred if I push the button."

I didn't doubt it for a second. The same friends who'd financed Amusement Enterprises. Because I had a strong hunch Greim had kept very good records when he'd worked for Desantis. The kind that provides hard dollars and guarantee favors in high places. That had been the payoff for setting up Desantis, and that was the file Margot had seen.

Greim seemed to be waiting for an answer. "Why, Alex. That sounds vaguely like a threat."

"You'd better believe it, Redman."

I didn't see him push the buzzer. But suddenly there was the sound of the door opening behind me.

"Any trouble, boss?" a raspy voice said.

I sensed the interview was over.

Greim's crocodile eyes narrowed. "Say goodbye, Redman. And say it for the last time."

I stood up, ground out the cigar in a large onyx ashtray on Greim's desk. I turned slowly. There were two of them. One was Lasky, muscles rippling, the other was a scrawny runt with a face like melting wax. Which is why they called him "Waxy" Nolan. He was a refugee from the Desantis Family and his

specialty was making people dead.

"Sid, show the man out," Greim said.

I started toward the door, not really expecting to make it. I didn't. A hand as large as a baseball mitt wrapped itself around my left arm.

"That's a sharp suit you got there, Redman," Sid Lasky said. "Nice material."

"I like it."

A mischievous smile spread out across his little boy face. My arm began to ache. "I really dig sharp clothes, you know. This sport coat of mine was imported from England."

"You're a symphony."

More pressure. More pain.

"Sure hate to see a sharp suit like that get wrinkled, Redman."

My eyes began to water. My arm felt like it was being crushed in a vice. Enough, already. My stiffened right hand sliced against Lasky's windpipe. He coughed out his tongue, clawing at his throat with one hand. But the other hand held onto my arm. Worse, yet, I saw the blur of a .45 calibre automatic materializing in Waxy's right hand.

"Waxy!" Greim's voice exploded.

"You gonna let this creep just walk outta here, boss?"

Greim seemed to consider the question, balancing hate with common sense. Hate triumphed.

"Five minutes, boys, and no bruises." Alex Greim left the room.

While Waxy Nolan covered me with a gun, Sid worked me over. It was work he obviously enjoyed and he was very good at it. And there were no bruises. At least none that would show. But now I knew how the butterflies had felt.

When it was over, they both took an arm and hustled me to the reception room like two bouncers ejecting a drunk from a Vegas casino. They dumped me into an arm chair and left.

Miss Albright gave me a concerned look. "Are you ill, Mr. Redman?"

I nodded. I was temporarily incapable of speech. But not of thought. I was thinking if I needed any further incentive to get that file, Alex Greim had just provided it. The question was how. I was certain it was in Greim's office. I was also certain the safe would be cleverly concealed and thoroughly bugged with alarms. It would take a real pro to crack it. Provided the pro could get by Waxy and Sid, and any other "associates" on the premises. The odds were too high. Besides, I was no safecracker.

When I could move under my own steam, I coaxed myself as far as the Dearborn Athletic Club for a rubdown and sauna. They helped take some of the kinks out of my aching body. They also gave me a chance to come up with some ideas. Only one of them made sense. If I couldn't get the file from Greim, I'd let him get it for me. All he needed was the proper motivation, and I knew just the man to provide it.

I put in a call to Sammy Flier.

Sammy had been a professional confidence man. He was supposedly going straight but I doubted it. What I had in mind wasn't strictly dishonest but it did require Sammy's particular talents. We haggled awhile over price and finally agreed on five hundred, plus expenses.

I made another call, this one to Ace Theatrical Supply. They had what I needed. I picked it up on my way back to my apartment.

The fragrance of bacon, eggs and coffee greeted me as I let myself in. Margot Maddax was in my kitchenette, splattering grease all over my electric range. She was also in my bathrobe. The bathrobe had never looked so good.

"Hi," she said, smiling. Then her smile wilted. "Hey, you look awful."

"You should have seen the other guy. Feeling better?"

She nooded, noticing the large package under my arm. "What's that?"

"A costume. I'm going to a masquerade party."

She stopped spattering to stare at me. "You're putting me on."

I grinned. "Not you. Alex Greim. You see, it's his party. But this one should come as a surprise."

I hoped. Because if it didn't, I just might end up the death of the party.

Late in the afternoon I was parked a half block from Les Fleurs, chewing on an extinct cigar. I checked my watch again. 4:45. Any time now. I looked toward the entrance of Les Fleurs and saw a man emerge. He was wearing a grey work uniform and carrying a tool kit. A telephone company service man checking out a line problem. Except this was no ordinary service man. It was Sammy Flier. Sammy winked at me as he walked past. The wink meant everything was set. Things were about to happen.

But as I waited, there was a vague feeling nagging at the back of my brain. Something was bugging me. Something Greim had said, or hadn't said. But it was too late to worry about now because smoke was

already seeping from the first floor windows of Les Fleurs.

A few of the cocktail hour patrons began to emerge with anxious expressions on their faces A minute later anxiety had exploded into panic. People were stampeding from the entrance as smoke billowed from every window of the building. The screams of sirens shattered the air. Fire engines and police cars converged on Les Fleurs from every direction. Firemen leapt from their trucks and began to unravel hoses while the police fanned out to contain traffic and a swelling crowd of spectators.

Sammy Flier had done his job to perfection. His tool kit was filled with several smoke grenades. Sammy had managed to place them in the building's ventilating system. The result was a very convincing three alarm fake. The question was—would it fool Alex Greim? I would soon know.

I put on the gas mask I'd brought along and studied the results in the rear view mirror. Hardly any of my face showed. Good. Then I got out of the car and walked up the street. A half dozen firemen were charging into the entrance of Les Fleurs. I charged in with them. Nobody stopped me. Why should they? I was dressed for the occasion in a bulky rubberized coat, steel helmet and boots. I was also carrying an ax. It wasn't for fighting fires.

I moved quickly through the smoke-clogged foyer. Someone was shouting orders. I ignored him, bounding up the escalator steps to the reception room of Amusement Enterprises. The room was choked with thick, swirling smoke.

I groped my way down the corridor that led to Greim's office. No one stopped me. All the employees had taken off. All but one. Like a faithful watchdog, Sid Lasky stood at his post outside his master's door.

"Hold it, man," he warned, coughing into a handkerchief.

"Chief said to check out all the rooms on this floor," I said in a gruff voice.

His big hands bunched into bowling ball fists. "Not this room, man."

I walked right up to him. "I'm sorry sir, but the chief. . ."

He cut me off with a scream. He screamed because I'd smashed the head of the ax down on his right foot. As he leaned down, I lifted the handle to meet his descending chin. I felt the impact shiver through my arms. Sid's massive head snapped back against the door frame with a resounding thud. I watched him sag to a squatting position like a drunken Buddha.

I frisked him quickly but Sid wasn't heeled. He was the muscle. Waxy carried the hardware. I shoved Sid to one side and cautiously tried the door handle. It turned. I sucked in my breath and barged right in without knocking. Why not? Hell, nobody shoots a fireman.

Wrong. Waxy Nolan would shoot a fireman. In fact, Waxy would shoot his own mother if Greim put out a contract on her. That was all too obvious from the snarl twisting his sagging face and the way his hand was poised inside his suit coat.

"Get the hell out of here!" Greim's voice boomed.

He was standing behind the mammoth desk. An attache case lay on the desk filled with manila folders. An open section of the oak panelling exposed a wall safe. Jackpot! My gamble paid off. The safe might be fireproof, but Greim wasn't about to take a chance on having his most valuable assets reduced to ashes.

"Sorry, sir," I said. "Just following orders. Chief said to get everyone out of the building."

I kept moving toward them as I talked. The game plan was to put Waxy out of commission before they realized it was Steve Redman behind the gas mask.

Waxy's squinty eyes darted to the door and back to me. "Where's Sid?"

"There's a guy outside passed out from the smoke," I said.

Greim swore into a handkerchief. "Tell your chief I own this building and I'll get out when I damn well please."

I kept moving, angling toward Waxy. "Look, fellows, I'm just doing my job, see." Only a few seconds more.

Waxy didn't give them to me. I don't know what tipped him off but suddenly he was croaking, "Watch it, boss! It's Redman!" As he croaked he was whipping the .45 from the shoulder holster inside his coat sooner than I wanted.

So much for the game plan. A half dozen feet separated me from Waxy. A .45 slug would cover the distance faster than Steve Redman. So I pushed the ax at Waxy, basketball style. It struck his gun hand a split second befroe the .45 exploded. Something tugged at my rubberized coat.

Waxy might have done better with another try, but the ax had jarred the gun from his hand, opening an ugly gash in his wrist. He was scrambling for the gun with his other hand when I slammed into him with all of my one hundred and seventy-six pounds. Waxy's

scrawny body flipped backward, arms flapping comically, like a scarecrow caught in a cyclone. I heard him crash into a table and lamp.

There wasn't time to give him a ten count because Alex Greim was charging at me like a crazed rhino, roaring curses. He didn't have a gun, but the large onyx paperweight he was wielding could make me just as dead as a slug.

I bent down quickly for the ax, grasping the handle at the head end. As I straightened up, I swung the handle toward Greim's stomach. One of us timed it perfectly. Air whooshed from Greim's gaping mouth. He dropped the ash tray and bent over as if he was trying to untie his shoelaces with his teeth. I took my time with the next one. A chip shot off the top of his granite skull. This one put him face down on the carpet. A birdie.

I sprang to the desk, shooting a quick look at Waxy. He wasn't moving. There were a few more folders on the desk. I quickly shoved them into the attache case and snapped it shut. Time to leave. But as I plunged into the smoky corridor, I noticed something was missing. Sid. He wasn't where I'd left him. Which meant he'd either gone for reinforcements or a gun or both. I wasn't sticking around to find out which.

I stumbled down the corridor to the reception room, almost blundering into a chair. No Sid. Almost home free. I reached the top of the stairs. I froze. Sound of heavy feet pounding up. I swore, bracing myself. Two shapes materialized out of the smoke. I let out my breath. The shapes were firemen. They were tugging a hose behind them.

"Right there, Redman!"

Sid's voice, behind me. I didn't have to turn to know he'd be holding a gun.

"Drop the brief case, Redman!"

Damn! End of the line, or was it?

I yelled, "The fire, up here!"

"Let 'er go, Frank!" a voice bellowed.

Frank let 'er go. A whoosh of water slashed past me. It was enough to make Sid hesitate. I didn't. I grabbed the muzzle of the hose the two firemen were holding and pivoted it toward Sid's hulking shape. The solid jet of water smashed into him, pounded him back, topped him like a bowling pin. That gave me a few seconds and I didn't waste them. I got the hell out of there.

I drove a few blocks and parked. There hadn't been time in Greim's office to examine

the folders. My hands trembled as I unsnapped the attache case. Why shouldn't they? If I was wrong about the contents, I was going to spend at least ten years practicing law behind bars.

But I wasn't wrong. The names on those folders read like a Who's Who in local business, labor and politics. There were a couple of police officials, too. And a name I was hoping I wouldn't find. A name that resolved that nagging at the back of my brain.

"YOU DID IT. Wow, you really did it!"

Margot Maddax looked like she could have hugged me when I walked in with the attache case. Could have. . .but she didn't. You see it's difficult to hug a person with a gun in your hand. The gun was my .38. And pointing at me.

"Aren't you a little confused, Margot. I'm the guy with the white plume and lance, remember?"

Her face sobered. "I'm sorry, Mr. Redman. But I'm going to have to take that file."

"Sure," I dropped the case on the armchair. "That was the idea, wasn't it? Take it to the police. But you're not about to do that, are you, Margot?"

The pale blue eyes hardened. "No, I'm not."

"Right. Mind if I fix a drink. I've earned it."

"I suppose not."

"Thanks." I moved to the bar. She watched me nervously, the gun panning with me. She was wearing a checked pantsuit now which she couldn't have found in my wardrobe. "The clothes. You went shopping?"

"I went back to my apartment for a few things. And my car. I'll need that now."

"That you will," I agreed, splashing vodka over rocks. "You really figured I'd come though to take a chance like that."

"I knew you could do it."

"Yeah, you knew a lot about me, didn't you, Margot?" I raised the highball glass in a toast. "To the damsel in distress. For as beautiful a con as I've ever seen."

I drank. The vodka hit my empty stomach and exploded. "I should have caught it earlier, but I was too busy making like Don Quixote and trying to settle an old score with Greim. Hell, Greim even told me, but I wasn't listening."

"Told you?"

"He said he wouldn't be stupid enough to throw a party to set up your murder. That was your idea, wasn't it?"

Margot moved cautiously toward the briefcase. "I couldn't get the file myself. The

only time I'd even seen it was three days ago."

"Yeah, I should have seen that, too. If Greim suspected you of knowing the significance of that file, he wouldn't have waited three days to silence you. Mind telling me how you got invited to the party?"

"I. . .I got Sid to take me."

I laughed and poured more vodka over rocks. A warm glow was beginning to flow through my body. "So you suckered Sid, too. All of us. Greim into thinking you were dead. Me into believing he tried to kill you."

"Would you have gotten the file for me if you hadn't thought my life depended on it?"

I laughed again. "Probably not. Well, you got what you wanted, Margot. Want to make sure it's there?"

Her eyes probed my face. "What do you mean?"

"Greim told me that, too. Not with words. It was the way he reacted when I said you were Judge Blackburn's stepdaughter. He almost gloated. And of course, you had to have a reason to get the file. Once I knew you'd conned me, it wasn't hard to figure out why."

"But if you knew, then why. . ." She didn't finish. Her face told me she'd guessed the answer. She set the briefcase on the chair, opened it. Her face collapsed. "Newspapers."

"I dropped the file off with an old buddy at headquarters. It should get Greim at least ten years and a lot of bad ink for some very prominent people. What did he know anyway?"

Margot sank into the chair, the .38 slipping from her fingers. "I don't know. It was an accident I even found out," she said. Her voice was empty, defeated. "It was several months ago. I was spending the weekend with Mom and Dad in Winnetka. And I overheard Dad talking to him on the phone."

I sighed. "So you got a job with Greim, cooked up this whole scene, just to get the judge off the hook."

She looked at me, her eyes moistening. "It was killing Dad. I had to help him after what he'd done for Mom and me. . ."

She covered her eyes with her hands and turned on the water works. I sighed. I got up and put together another vodka over rocks. Margot had earned her drink, too—and something else. She stared unbelievingly at the folder I laid on her lap.

Later we watched it burn in the wastebasket, sipping our vodkas, her body warmly snuggled against mine on the sofa.

Don Quixote never had it so good.

When you buy and sell a commodity like a human life, try to remember two can play at that game—and only one stays alive!

A PRIVATE, RESTFUL PLACE

by JOHN LUTZ

BRENT GARRITY'S secretary and receptionist came into his office and briskly placed a folder in the filing cabinet.

"There's a Mr. Calder outside to see you," Judith said, sliding the metal drawer shut.

Brent Garrity, of Garrity Construction Company, looked up from the surveyor's report

he was studying. Mr. Calder must be Art Calder. He hadn't seen him in over a year.

"Tell him to come in, Judith," Garrity said, and placed the report aside.

Art Calder was a middle aged, medium height man, well dressed but with a flair that just kept him from being termed conservative. He had a long dark face with a permanent leer on it that Garrity knew women found attractive.

"Art," Garrity said, standing to shake hands, "been quite a while."

"Time's nothing to old friends," Calder said. He sat in the chair before Garrity's desk and lit a slender cigar almost small enough to be a cigarette.

Garrity stood and walked to the small bar near the window.

"What brings you?" he asked, as he poured two Scotches. "Just social?"

"Business." Calder drew from his suitcoat pocket a large folded paper. He glanced around him. "This office absolutely private?"

Garrity nodded. He gave Calder his drink, then sat back behind his desk and buzzed Judith on the intercom to tell her he didn't want to be disturbed. He was curious about what Calder had in mind, and a little apprehensive. Calder had always operated a shade —some said more than a shade—outside the law. Where he obtained his money no one knew for sure, but he obtained it some place because he'd always had plenty.

Calder leaned over and spread the paper on Garrity's desk top. It was a map of a plot of ground measured at about fifteen square acres.

Garrity looked up and smiled. "You selling real estate?"

"Not me," Calder said. "I own that property."

"You're selling something," Garrity said, still with the smile.

"Nope, I'm giving something away."

"Aren't they all?"

"Some of them say they are," Calder said, "but I mean it. Now I wouldn't pretend there aren't any strings attached. We're old friends and we can trust one another. That's why I chose you."

Garrity folded his hands on top of the spread out map. "Chose me for what?"

"To give that land to."

"Give?"

"That plot of ground's southwest of the city, right on the edge of one of the plushest areas in the county. It would be great for a small, classy subdivision." Calder sat back, squinting through his cigar

smoke. "Now, I happen to know your business hasn't gone so good lately, Brent, and that land's worth over four thousand an acre. I'd hate to see you turn me down on a safe proposition."

"What is the proposition?"

"You get the land—worth over sixty thousand dollars—on the condition you build a small subdivision on it, and I get certain privileges."

Now came the curve, Garrity thought. "What kind of privileges?"

Calder leaned back and sipped his Scotch. "Remember how you got the money to start up this business, Brent? If that bank you worked for had known you embezzled that money you invested and then returned after it had made you a bundle, they'd have prosecuted you, I'm sure. Come to think of it, the statute of limitations still hasn't expired."

Garrity looked at his old friend over the wide desk. "Is this blackmail?"

"Me? Blackmail you?" Calder appeared genuinely offended. "Never believe it, Brent. Like I said, I came to you because we were friends, to do you a favor."

Garrity knew he'd be wise to go along with that favor.

"What's the pitch?" he asked.

"No pitch, Brent. It's business. When you're building those houses I want you to show me the loan applications. I want you to give me the right to choose who buys there."

"That's not exactly legal," Garrity said, "but it could be done with a lie here and there in the right places."

"Then the land's yours," Calder said, tossing down the rest of his Scotch. "Oh, there is one more thing."

"I suspected there would be."

Calder grinned his leering grin. "I've got a friend who specializes in electronics. I want him to be able to install a few things in the walls of those houses. And of course it'll be a secret between us two that he has."

It dawned on Garrity gradually as he sat looking at Calder's calm dark eyes. "Listening devices?"

Calder nodded.

"That's crazy," Garrity said. "Do you know the trouble that could get me in?"

"And me," Calder said, "we'd be in this together, and you to the tune of over sixty thousand dollars. And it's safe, believe me. That's why I came to you, Brent. People trust you, a guy with his own business, classy looking guy with a handsome mug and salt-and-pepper hair. Who don't trust Cary Grant?"

"Thanks for the flattery," Garrity said, "but I assume it's blackmail you have in mind,

and that's a pretty serious crime."

"So's embezzlement. My friend in electronics can plant his bugs so nobody could find them even if they knew they were in the house."

Garrity sat quietly for a moment. Sixty thousand dollars would be just the thing to bolster his sagging fortunes, not to mention the added profits from the houses he'd build. And Calder *was* smart. As long as he'd been making good money by his wits, he had to be.

Calder was sitting calmly, enjoying his cigar, as Garrity rose, folded the map and tossed it back to him. Then Garrity walked to a closet and got out his sport coat.

"Where you going?" Calder asked.

"We're going to look at that land," Garrity answered. "We'll take my car."

The two men stood by Garrity's Cadillac on a rise overlooking the plot of land. Calder was right, Garrity thought, it was a perfect place for a subdivision. Secluded, yet close to major arteries, the acreage lay almost perfectly flat, with a grove of large trees that could be conserved.

"It looks good," Garrity said. "What kind of houses do you have in mind?"

Calder leaned back against the polished fender of the car and shrugged. "Expensive, but not too expensive. Say thirty to forty thousand."

"That would be about right for this area," Garrity said. "We can set them on big lots, build about a dozen of them, with a little park area and a community pool."

"That sounds fine," Calder said. "I like the idea of the park and swimming pool. That sort of thing is big now."

Garrity stood gazing at the land, constructing in his mind the curving avenue, the small park area with a picnic pavilion, maybe an L-shaped pool with a clubhouse.

"We'll push the idea that it's secluded, away from things," Calder said. Then he chuckled. "The kind of buyers I want to attract will want something private."

Garrity looked at him without smiling.

"Come on," he said, turning away from the land and walking toward the car door. "We've got things to do. We have to arrange for the transfer of title on that land, a phoney sale at a fair price to make it look right. Then we have to hire an architect, surveyors, get building permits, check into zoning laws—"

"That's your game," Calder said, as he opened the door on

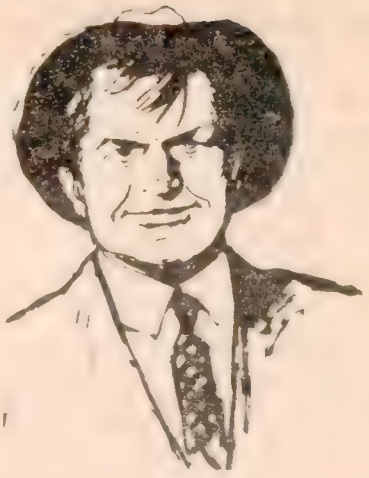
the passenger's side and got into the car beside Garrity. "You line all that up after the land's yours, then get in touch with me again and we'll talk some more."

"All right," Garrity said, backing the big car around to point toward the highway. "When we're ready for construction I'll let you know." He accepted Calder's plain white business card with only a phone number on it.

Everything went smoothly enough. Permits were obtained easily for homes in that price range, and Garrity hired an architect he'd worked with before to design long brick ranch homes with real eye appeal in the thirty-five thousand dollar bracket. When things had progressed to the point where he was ready to construct display homes, Garrity telephoned Calder and asked him to come to the office.

Judith ushered Calder in and locked the door as she went back to the reception room to see that they weren't disturbed. Calder looked his usual prosperous self, smoking his half breed cigar and wearing a large gleaming silver ring on his finger.

Garrity showed him the renderings of the proposed houses.



"Great," Calder said enthusiastically. "These are classy looking houses."

"There are three basic models." Garrity thumbed through the drawings to demonstrate. "I plan to build a display of each model and then advertise by the end of next month."

"No need to advertise," Calder said, flashing his ring as he waved his hand. "I figure we'll send color brochures through the mail to prospective buyers. I've been doing some research and I've got a list of them. And I want the houses priced low enough so they can hardly refuse the deal, but not so low as to look fishy."

Calder's words didn't surprise Garrity. He knew his old friend, smart and industrious as he was, would have spent the last few months planning everything to the last detail.

"Another thing," Calder said.

"How about a name that'll give them the impression of peace and seclusion? I kind of like 'Quiet Meadow'. Under it on the brochure we can print 'A Private, Restful Place'."

Garrity sat back and thought about the name. It was a good one.

"All right," he said, "and we can name the street Quiet Meadow Drive."

"Great!" Calder sat up straight in his chair and bit down on his cigar. "Now when you start getting prospective buyers you let me know so I can screen them. If there's a big response to our mail campaign we can afford to be choosy, and if anybody we don't send a brochure to happens to see the subdivision and tries to buy, you let me know right away if you can't discourage them." He drew a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Garrity. "This is the mailing list. I might add some more names to it later. I might see to it that some desirable customers want to move from their present home."

Garrity looked down at the list of thirty-five or forty names. He recognized a few of them, a local politician, a union leader, some fairly prominent business men. "Do you want me to show you the advertising brochures for your okay?"

"Naw!" Calder shook his head. "I trust you, Brent. That's why I gave you this deal." He dropped cigar ash into the ash tray on the desk corner and stood to leave. "If you need me just call me at the same number." He turned at the door. "You build a good house, Brent. We won't have any trouble selling them."

After Calder had gone the acrid odor of cigar smoke still lingered in the air. Garrity sat for a while drumming his fingers on his desk, then he got up and opened a window.

The weather was good, and the display houses went up fast. After the plasterboard had been put in Garrity phoned Calder, and that weekend Garrity stayed away from the subdivision while the almost finished houses were bugged. Monday he drove out and inspected them carefully, but he could find nothing. He began to feel better about the deal, safer. The display homes had only to be carpeted, painted and furnished, then things would go quickly.

The brochures were mailed on a Wednesday, and by the end of that weekend five houses had been sold. Calder came in to inspect the loan applications at Garrity's office.

"Great," he said as he looked at the names on the applica-

tions. "I wanted this one. And him too! And this one's a business agent for that crooked Meat Cutter's Union!" Calder okayed all the applications but one, on which he instructed Garrity to stall in case a more desirable customer turned up.

Calder added a few more names to the mailing list, and by the end of the month all twelve houses were sold. Only one family got in that hadn't been on the list, an automobile dealer and his wife who Garrity just couldn't dissuade. But after doing some research on the couple Calder didn't seem too upset about it.

The swimming pool and clubhouse were built rapidly. The weather held, and by the end of October the subdivision was completed and all the families had moved in.

Garrity had realized a nice profit. Calder congratulated him on the deal, took him to one of the best restaurants in town and treated him to a steak dinner, then told him not to worry and that he'd be in touch with him from time to time to let him know how things were going.

That Saturday morning Garrity took a final drive down Quiet Meadow Drive. The houses were even more attractive than they'd promised to be in the renderings, low and rambling with wide brick fronts and small, columned porches. It was as quiet and restful a place as the brochures had claimed, one of the best projects Garrity had completed. He felt good about that as he drove back to his office.

Six months passed before he saw Calder again. His cigar at a jaunty angle in his mouth, the snappily dressed man walked into Garrity's office and tossed an envelope containing a thousand dollars on the desk.

"What's this for?" Garrity asked, tucking the flap of the envelope back in.

"A bonus," Calder said with a smile. "I told you I cut you in on this deal because we were friends." He turned to make sure the office door was closed. "I'm cleaning up on this thing," he confided, his smile widening. "You'd be surprised some of the things that go on in those houses, some of the 'confidential' conversations. I've got ten of them sending me monthly payments now, and I keep finding out more and more about them. If the husband doesn't have something to hide, the wife does—sometimes both of them. I picked our customers carefully, and it's paying off."

Garrity stared at Calder and bit his lower lip nervously. "Aren't you afraid, though, blackmailing so many people in

such a small neighborhood?"

Calder shook his head cockily. "They don't know who I am. I phone them and let them know what I know, then they send their payments to a post office box where I pick up the money when I feel like it."

"But what if they all get together, find out somebody's blackmailing *all* of them?"

"How likely is that?" Calder asked. "The kind of things I blackmail them for they don't want anybody to know, least of all a neighbor."

Garrity's graying eyebrows arched downward. "You'd be surprised. Neighbors confide. And all they'd have to find out is that they're all being blackmailed, not what each of them is being blackmailed for."

"You worry too much," Calder said breezily. "If I told you about the car dealer's wife—"

Garrity raised a hand. "Never mind."

"There was one big cocktail party that gave me enough information to shock the warden of San Quentin. I rented a house near Quiet Meadow, and I just sit by the receiver switching from room to room."

"Nevertheless," Garrity said, "I pity you if they ever get together and find out about you—who and where you are."

Calder laughed. "So what could happen? Is somebody gonna murder me? Not with eleven other families suspecting what they did. Nobody could do anything without the other eleven knowing about it, or at least suspecting. They all might be in sympathy with my murderer, but could that murderer ever be *sure* somebody wouldn't talk? Could he ever feel safe?" Calder flashed his lopsided grin. "There's no way they could evenly distribute the guilt. Safety in numbers, Brent."

"You said eleven other families," Garrity said, "but you told me you're only blackmailing ten victims."

"I'll get them all," Calder assured him, "eventually I'll have them all."

And three weeks later Calder phoned Garrity at the office and informed him proudly that he was now collecting payments from at least one victim in each of the twelve families in Quiet Meadow. And as he found out more and more about his puzzled victims, the size of the payments grew.

After Garrity had said goodbye to Calder and replaced the receiver in its cradle, Judith knocked on the door then came in to file something. She either hadn't had the opportunity or hadn't thought to mention to Garrity that the telephone repairman had been there earlier

that week. If she'd mentioned it to him then he would have been surprised, for the telephone had been working perfectly.

The next Friday Garrity was walking to his car on the parking lot when a man who looked vaguely familiar approached him. He was a large man with very curly hair, and he smiled at Garrity.

"Remember me, Mr. Garrity? Harold Greenfield."

At the mention of the name the man's identity sprang into Garrity's mind. One of the buyers of a Quiet Meadow home, the Meat Cutter's Union executive.

"What can I do for you?" Garrity asked.

"My basement has one heck of a leak when it rains, Mr. Garrity. I've called and called but your secretary keeps putting me off. I wonder if you'd come out personally and take a look at it?"

"Sure," Garrity said, "sure, how about tomorrow?"

"I'm not going to be home tomorrow," the curly headed man said. "I'd rather you'd make it now if it's not too much trouble."

Garrity noticed then that three other men were standing by Greenfield's car, three other Quiet Meadow customers. Greenfield's big hand was suddenly gripping Garrity's arm, hard.

"All right," Garrity said, his heart picking up a beat, "if it has to be this evening."

Garrity sat quietly in the rear seat during the ride to Quiet Meadow. The other men also sat silently, or made infrequent, commonplace remarks. The sun was going down as Greenfield parked the car in the driveway of his house on Quiet Meadow Drive and the men went inside. As they were walking up the driveway toward the front door, Garrity noticed a large hole with the earth heaped beside it dug in the center of the front lawn, and he felt a cold uneasiness.

There were over twenty people inside the house, men and women, dressed casually, standing and chatting casually, some of them holding drinks. It looked like an ordinary suburban get together.

Garrity took three steps inside the door, then stopped, catching his breath. Art Calder was seated on a sofa, flanked by two men. Calder's long face sagged, as if gravity were pulling on him excessively hard. Calder, who had believed in safety in numbers. He looked up and saw Garrity and his lips moved as if he were going to speak, but he was silent. In a corner of the room several

women were talking about the lack of service at a nearby supermarket. As everyone gradually became aware of Garrity's presence the conversation died, and drinks were set on tables or coasters.

"What's going on here?..." Garrity asked in a high voice. Then he asked Calder: "What's going on here?"

But it was Greenfield who answered. "We'll tell you what's going on here, Mr. Garrity." He stepped forward. They all stepped forward.

When Judith arrived at the office of Garrity Construction Company at eight o'clock the next morning Mr. Garrity wasn't there, which for a hard worker like him was unusual. He didn't arrive by nine, which was most unusual. He didn't arrive by ten. He didn't arrive at all.

None of his friends or acquaintances took too much notice when Art Calder suddenly disappeared. After all, it had happened before. So it was over a month before his girl, Barby Johnson, reported him missing to the police. The police investigated the case, as they'd investigated the disappearance of Brent Garrity, but they discovered nothing, and eventually the two cases were filed with dozens of similar cases of men who had dropped out of sight in the large city that year.

Today, if you were to pass down Quiet Meadow Drive, you would see a restful, quiet suburban setting, well kept, expensive homes with neatly mowed lawns, playing children, gleaming, just washed second cars parked in driveways. And in exactly the same spot on each front lawn you would see a straight, sturdy oak tree. The trees are about the same size, as if they'd all been put in at about the same time. They are not large trees now, but eventually they will grow tall, with massive trunks and thick, deep roots. Already they provide a bit of shade, and they give the neighborhood a peaceful, uniform appearance.

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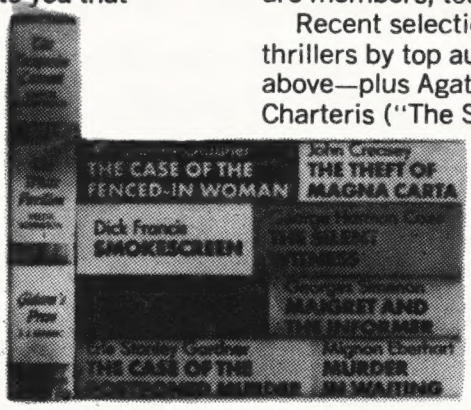
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